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STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

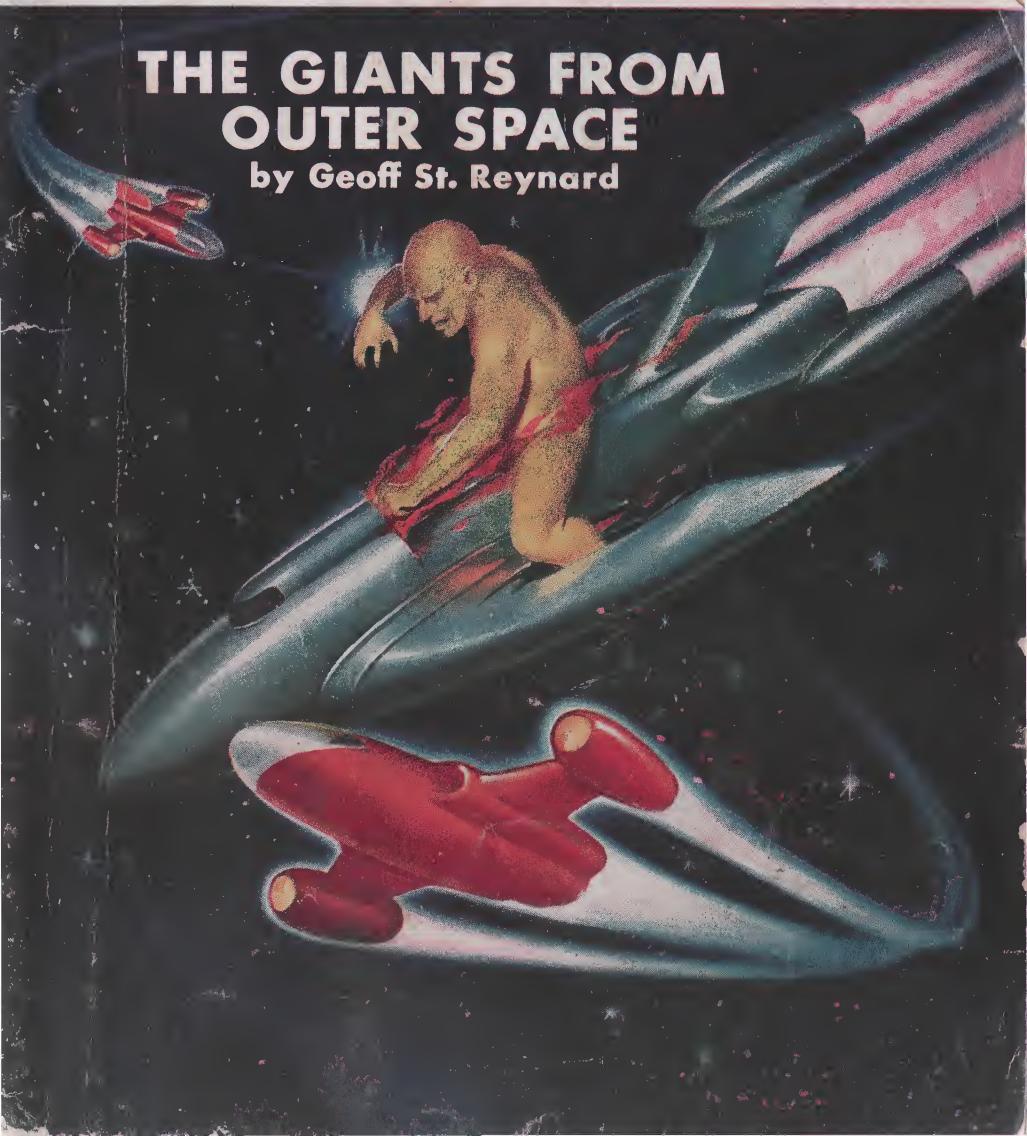
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THE GIANTS FROM OUTER SPACE

by Geoff St. Reynard



Introducing the AUTHOR



I WAS born in New York in 1928, but my parents moved soon after to Maplewood, New Jersey. I started to write in the fourth or fifth grade, as near as I can remember, and determined at that time to become a freelance writer. My output was largely short plays and poetry, with an occasional short story!

Through high school I was an avid, though silent, science-fiction fan. My first science-fiction story, at the age of fourteen, went to the now-defunct *Astonishing Stories*. It dealt with the idea that our planets are really gigantic eggs, our sun an incubator, and the mama bird on her way back. I was surprised to hear from the editor that the idea had been used. Someone had gotten there before me.

After graduating from high school, I hitchhiked to California, worked a few months, hitchhiked back and joined the army. I wrote nothing in service except a few letters home. My time was taken up walking guard on the thirty-eighth parallel, and later, playing guitar in a dance band in Seoul. Discharged in 1948, I enrolled in New York University and started to write again, this time nothing but short stories.

Three years later I graduated, with a wife (whom I had met in a writing class given by Irwin Shaw), a trunkful of stories and moderately high hopes.

After a few months of writing I still had the wife and the trunkful of stories. I took a job in an air-

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The Editorial

THINGS are going on up on Luna, we suspect. A few months ago we had a pleasant chat with Fox B. Holden, a top Madge writer and a nice guy to boot. Fox mentioned a phenomenon he had observed a number of times with his home-mounted telescope. It seems that during a several hour period of studying the moon on various occasions, he noted a small dark speck. This was not curious in itself, until he noted that the speck seemed to move minutely in a straight line. Then abruptly it made a ninety degree turn and followed another straight line until it vanished. During the course of this movement Fox suspected a spot of dust etc., on his lens. He carefully checked the lens but found it free of any obstructing matter. After watching the phenomenon on various occasions he came to the conclusion that if it was not something on his lens, or something in the atmosphere over Earth (possible but unlikely) then the possibility existed that he was witnessing actual movement of some large object on the Moon's surface.

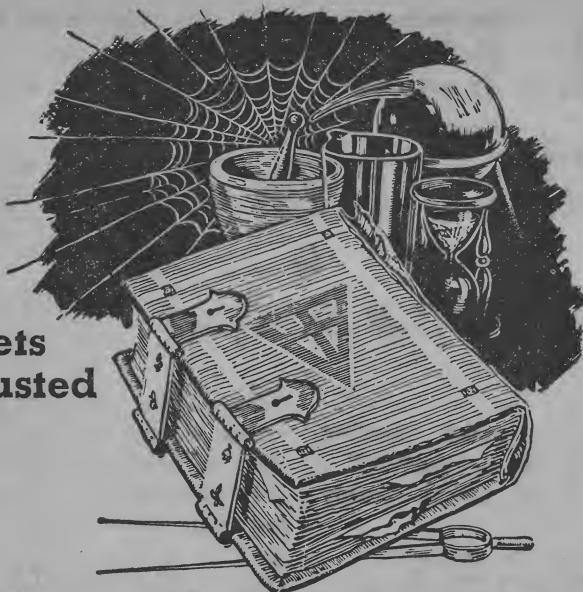
WE HAVE since talked to other friends who are amateur astronomers and have found similar occurrences quite common. Most of these moon-watchers shrug away the phenomenon as some natural but unidentifiable obstruction between

telescope and Luna. To anyone but a science fiction reader this is the easiest and most logical explanation.

WE'RE just imaginative enough to refuse to shrug the matter away in such fashion. We offer the idea that many amateur astronomers are witnessing actual movement on Luna's surface. What's going on up there? We don't know, but reflecting on the "Flying Saucer" sightings of recent years, we wonder if our Moon isn't a temporary landing base for the elusive craft! In this respect it would be interesting to know what sort of reports our government receives from Earth's large observatories. Well? . . . wh



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entrusted
to a
few**



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The Rosicrucians (AMORC)

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.

Grim terror lurked in the void many light years from Earth. But Pinkham and his men were unaware of it — until suddenly they discovered —

The Giants From Outer Space

by

Geoff St. Reynard

“**O**KAY, make another check on the reading.”

“I’ve made four checks already —”

“Damn it, make another!”

“It’s no use, Pink. The life-scanner’s never wrong.”

“No possibility of a monkey wrench dropped into its innards? It couldn’t be seeing things that aren’t there?”

“Not in a million years.”

“Then there’s no water, no air, no gravity worth mentioning, and still —”

“That’s right. There’s life on that silly-looking little apple. *There’s somebody sitting on it!*”

In the ninetieth star system to be explored by the insatiably curious men of Earth, there were seven planets. Between the fourth and fifth from the star there was a belt of asteroids: some three or four

thousand tiny planetary bodies traveling in vast ellipses around the star. At one time they had probably constituted a single planet, but some unimaginable explosion far back in time had scattered the great ball broadcast, and the largest of the resulting planetoids was now no more than 440 miles across. In the gargantuan belt of them, many were no bigger in diameter than the spaceship *Elephant’s Child* herself.

When the instruments of the ship detected this belt of asteroids, Captain Pinkham turned aside as a matter of course, to cruise through it and let his cartographer map it, his organicus officer check it for signs of life, and all his other crewmen turn their inquisitive eyes and machines upon it. It was the seventh asteroid belt to be discovered by man, if you included the one between the orbits of Jupiter and



Mars, back home, incredible light-years behind . . .

No life had ever been discovered on an asteroid, except for the vegetable-animal space-eating bacteria on Pallas. No life —

Until now.

CAPTAIN Pinkham headed for the tiny bit of planet, let his ship's screens pick it up and relay its presence to the automatic recoil engines, which slammed the *Elephant's Child* to a stop about twelve feet away from the knobbly slate-gray surface. The energy testers, having come into play simultaneously with the screens, at once flashed the green "Not Radioactive" sign; a fairly useless gesture, since a positive reaction would have turned the ship away at an angle before it entered the danger zone.

The senior officer said, "Jerry, let's take a look at that critter you think is perched on this thing."

The organicus officer grinned with one corner of his mouth. He pulled down a platinum lever, and a thirty-inch screen above his control board sprang to life. The black of space showed the bumpy planetoid like a ball of cold lava, and seated in the center of the screen, a man in a spacesuit.

Captain Pinkham licked his lips. "Okay," he said, "I owe you a

shot of rye. You were right." Then he blinked his gray eyes. "My God!" he roared. "What's a human being doing out here in System Ninety?"

The outburst, he felt, was quite justified; in fact, he might have gone stark raving crazy with justification. There seemed no possibility that his space armada could have been preceded to this star system by another from Earth. The ancient Martians might have made it this far, but their spacesuits were nothing like those of Terra. So he and Jerry were now staring at a hopeless absurdity. It couldn't be there.

Pinkham leaned sideways and bellowed into the intercom. "Get in here! Everybody! On the double!"

The crew came running, from the engine rooms, the astrogatium and astrolab, from the sleeping quarters and the mess hall. The ship was gigantic; it took twenty minutes for the ship's complement to assemble in the captain's control hall. There were fifty-seven men, eighteen officers. They stood in casual formation and gaped at the life-scanner's screen.

The spacesuited figure had not moved.

Captain Pinkham said, "One question. Which of you gadget-happy jokers gimmicked up the scan-

ner on us? Who did this?"

Nobody said anything. Only one man smiled: Lieutenant Joe Silver, a very bright, very ambitious big cub who was on his second extragalactic expedition and obviously had visions of earning his captain's bronze comets within the year. Joe was a rather unpleasant young piece of beef, thought Pink; but he wouldn't pull practical jokes. He was too bloody serious. If he smiled, it was probably because he was enjoying the Captain's evident bewilderment.

"Then it isn't a joke," said Pinkham. "Three of you outside repairmen get into your suits and bring *that* in." He gestured at the silent figure on the motionless little world of the scanner. "Jerry says it's alive. Handle with care." He waved them his dismissal.

Some twenty minutes later he watched the screen as the three crewmen descended to the surface of the planetoid, pried loose the double anchor which the unknown Earthman had sunk into the ball's crust to hold him steady on the almost-gravityless world, lifted the bulky figure and leaped upward, like thick but weightless panthers carrying their prey, into the open airlock.

The spacesuited stranger had not moved in the slightest.

Yet the scanner, which was nev-

er wrong, said that within the armor of the suit was life.

Pinkham sat staring at the blanked-out screen, and a queer chill began to crawl up his neck. An old slang phrase came to his mind, and wouldn't leave.

How come? How come? *How come?*

CHAPTER II

PINK and Jerry and Joe Silver walked around and around the spacesuit. Bill Calico, the astro-gator, and Washington Daley, the senior lieutenant, sat in front of it on stools covered with Venusian joerg-hide, going through a routine of flippant gags that thinly disguised their bafflement. Finally Pinkham said, "When were these suits invented?"

"2144," said Joe Silver.

Bright kid, thought Pink with irritation. "Thirty-odd years ago. That's my guess, too."

"October 1st, 2144, is the patent date," said Joe Silver smugly.

"Click, click, click," said Daley. "Your mind is a damn file room, Silver. It gives me the jitters."

Joe Silver looked at him expressionlessly.

"I just read the date on the instruction plate," he said.

Captain Pinkham bent down and read aloud from the nayrust plate

set into the back of the spacesuit.

"Bernard Patent Slugjet Suit, size 24-B patented" . . . here it is. "Instructions for reviving occupant. The man in this suit is alive if the translucent face plate is tinted orange?"

"It is," said Bill Calico with eagerness.

"Unscrew the seven small screws around face plate. Depress lever Z on right side of chest plate. Loosen gorget, shoulder pieces, palllettes, brassarts, cuisses" They were following the instructions as he read. He thought, these suits were terrific, they were the best. But you had to have a billion dollars behind your expedition or you couldn't afford 'em. Each one cost half as much as a regular-size moon rocket! They shouldn't have stopped making them, though. They ought to have tried bringing down the cost. One of these could save a man's life when nothing else in God's universe could; and a man's life is surely worth as much as half a moon rocket?

The Bernard Slugjet Suit. Guaranteed to keep a guy alive for a minimum of 250 years in free space. Guaranteed to let him emerge healthy and — miraculously — sane, provided he was picked up within the time limit.

You were jetting toward the edge of the galaxy, say. Your ship

ran into trouble. A big meteor tore out your belly, or your fuel gave out, or any of a million things happened to crack up the beautiful great spaceship that was your vehicle and your pride and almost *you*, an extension of yourself, an expression of your yearning to conquer the stars. So you got into your slugjet suit and walked out an airlock, if you had enough warning, that is. And there you were in space.

Your suit was actually a miniature spaceship itself; if there was land anywhere near, you aimed for it, loosed your powerful shoulder jets, and shot toward it. The suit had a range of about five hundred thousand miles, which was often enough.

But suppose it wasn't. Then you just stayed there in black space, and you started to touch buttons in the big gloves, to pull levers on the chest, and to activate other circuits by the sound of your voice. And the suit became a world for you, a world that kept you healthy and sane for a quarter of a millennium.

Your life processes were slowed down to a pace of only a crawl and a mumble, next door to death. Your breathing couldn't be detected. Your heart beat six times to the hour. Drugs did it, and vapors, the depressants of a hundred

planets gathered and refined by Bernard for his suits.

You didn't sleep; you didn't need to. You were a slug, a worm in a cocoon, awake in an ultra-slow-motion way. In 250 years, you aged about fifteen. The suits were supposed to have a maximum efficiency of a thousand years; you came out an old man at the end of that time, maybe; but it was an even bet that you *did* come out.

And to keep your mind whole and unwarped, there in the immensity of brain-shattering space, you were entertained — well and constantly.

Three-dimensional movies were shown on your translucent face plate, so slow that to a person with unhampered reflexes they would look like stills. Music played to you, a low drone and buzz that to you was jazz, classical, anything you selected. The Minute Waltz took several hours to play in your ear.

Body wastes and carbon dioxide were eliminated, and breathable air released, by the same principles in use in spaceships. You were fed intravenously, vitamins, concentrates of everything you needed were stuck into you without your knowing it, for you lived too slowly to be capable of pain. The temperature of your suit was even. Audiotherapy was given you at suitable intervals. You were res-

cued, and came out of your suit as well-adjusted, as balanced as you'd gone in. Maybe more so.

Rescued? It wasn't all left to luck. The radio in your high bulbous crest broadcast a constant S.O.S. Your suit glowed so that it could be spotted easily, a crimson star against the blackness. Your own life within it called to every life-scanner within 500,000 miles.

Meanwhile, you were in a damn fine world of your own . . .

Pinkham finished reading the instructions, and walked around to the front of the bulky suit. Bill Calico lifted off the crest, Daley removed the helmet, Jerry and Joe Silver caught the suit as it fell away in two sections.

And Captain Pinkham caught the girl.

SHE was slim and full in the places where a woman ought to be so, and her hair, close-cropped, was black-brown and shining. Her face was good, damn good, bloody damn fine to a spaceman who'd been out on the ways for a couple of years; but Pink had the happy thought — it was the first one he had, before the shock really hit him that that this was a *girl* — that she would have looked just as good to him on Earth.

She wore the uniform of an organicus officer: just a bit dated,

the lapels too wide by an inch, the synthetic fabric of the jacket just a little more clinging and revealing than the current fashion, the pants narrow at the cuff where today's were bell-bottomed. She must have been out here a while; not more than thirty years, though. She did not look more than twenty-five now, and the normal life span was a hundred and ten . . . Pink snapped his queer thoughts sharply into line. What did her age matter to him?

She was limp in his arms, as relaxed as a sleeping kitten. Her eyes, deep brown, were open but heavy-lidded. He half-knelt, cradling her comfortably, as Jerry anticipated his question and said, "She's okay. She'll be out of it in a few minutes. She's still living slower than we are."

Joe Silver, unaccountably across the room by the life-scanner, said, "Hey! There's another one!"

"Another what?" asked his senior lieutenant, Daley.

"Another fellow — or girl — in a Slugjet. Down that direction a few thousand miles."

As all of them but Pink raced to the screen, the girl began to sing, softly, musically, and very slowly.

*"I am sick of this bucketing
Lunar run*

*In this dirty old steel cocoon;
I'm sick of the Earth and I'm*

*sick of the Sun
And I'm sick to death of the
Moon . . . "*

That was — what was the name? — the Lament of the Veteran Rocketeer, a ballad that Pink had been singing in his grade school days. He hadn't heard it for more than a dozen years. Probably popular when this gal blasted off Terra.

She stopped singing. " 'Bout time you got here," she said drowsily. "I've been waiting for months. Didn't Fawcett's crest radio reach you?"

"Take it easy," said Pink, and told himself that was a stupid thing to say. "Who are you? What was your expedition?"

She blinked. "You aren't Commander Dyevis, are you? Who are you?"

"I'm Joe Silver," said that young upstart over Pinkham's shoulder.

"Nobody asked you," said Daley. They had left the screen, all but Jerry, who was making course for the second speck of life in the asteroid belt.

"This is the *Elephant's Child*, flagship of Armada Seven, 843 days out of Terra to explore star systems 87 through 93," said Pink quietly. "We just plucked you off an asteroid in System Ninety. This is —" take it easy, he said to himself this time, "this is October 18th,

2176."

"Holy Holmendis," said the girl, turning a little pale. "Our ship split up her seams in November of 2158."

Daley, the oldest of the lot at thirty-six, and the coolest space-head of them all, said, "May I introduce Captain John Pinkham, our leader?" Formalities eased a shock, he knew, and helped you over the rough spots. "I'm Lt. Washington Daley and you are —"

"Organicus Officer Circe Smith, of Colonel Fawcett's exploratory armada," she said automatically.

"Fawcett!" said everyone, loudly and with amazement.

"So he got to System Ninety," said Pink. "Every spaceman on the ways has wondered about Fawcett for eighteen years. He vanished with two ships —"

"She knows that, Captain," said Daley.

"Oh. Of course."

"Our other ship was still okay when we broke up," said O. O. Smith, brushing her short hair back from a forehead that was wide and intelligent. "My crest radio was on the fritz, but Fawcett's was all right and he was supposed to call Commander Dyevis, who was cruising down by Planet Four. At least half a dozen of us got off in Slugjet Suits before the ship died. I guess

his message never got to Dyevis."

"Lord knows," said Pinkham. The *Elephant's Child* shivered slightly as her recoil engines stopped her. Jerry came over from the controls.

"There's another one sitting outside," he said casually.

"Maybe it's Colonel Fawcett," the girl cried eagerly.

Jerry shook his head. "I'm afraid not." He looked at her a moment, then turned to Pinkham. "This one has four arms," he said.

CHAPTER III

THEY sat at dinner, the eighteen officers of the *Elephant's Child*, eating fresh vegetables and curried lamb from the hydroponics farm and the frozen food lockers. On either side of Captain Pinkman sat O. O. Circe Smith, of the lamented Fawcett expedition, and First Officer Ynohp of the extinct Martian Space Navy.

"If you Terrestrians came to Mars over one hundred years ago," Ynohp was saying, in a clear and metallic voice that came from the lingoalter on his chest — a tiny box which could be set to change any of nine thousand spoken languages into any one of the others — "and at that time my people had lost the secrets of space travel for approximately four thousand

years, this means that I have been reclining on a planetoid here for at least 4,100 years. The probability is that it has been much longer. Unfortunately my time recorder has long since become inoperative."

He extended one of his four rib appendages and picked up a piece of carrot. "Naturally I was in a cataleptic state," he went on. "As you may know, in my race that means that all body processes are suspended *in toto*. There is no growth and no decay. Moth and rust do not corrupt, you might put it."

Pink frowned momentarily. There was a false note somewhere, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He tried to remember all he could about the dying race of Martians. What Ynohp was saying was correct, as nearly as he could recall, but . . . he shrugged. My God! he thought, this critter's over four thousand years old!

Well, Circe's about forty-five.

The hell she is. She's twenty-seven, which was her age when her ship was wrecked, plus about one actual year of life which equals the eighteen she was lost in the Slugjet. Twenty-eight, then, really. I'm thirty-one. Not a bad combination.

Hey, boy, you're a confirmed bachelor, remember?

He chuckled. Who says so? He

took a look at Circe. The prettiest spaceman who ever came my way, he said to himself happily.

The dinner broke up. Space etiquette demanded that he escort the Martian to his stateroom first, for the four-armed little gray man was senior to a mere *organicus* officer; when he returned to the mess hall, he found that Joe Silver had whisked Circe away to show her the new improvements in space drives and other technical details.

"At least," said Bill Calico, "he said he was going to."

Pink went off to talk to Jerry, who was a lousy substitute for a beautiful girl.

He found his O. O. tinkering with the life-scanner.

"Something wrong," Jerry said through his teeth. He was a slim young man — Pink, who stood six-three and hefted in at two hundred, would have made two of Jerry — and his normally joyous expression was now writhed into a frown. "The red light's not on, but the scanner's not working."

"How d'you know?"

"Had a hunch. Don't ask me why — unless it's that the Martian makes me suspicious. Anyway, I tested the scanner; turned it inside and aimed it all over the ship. Nothing doing. No life in here, according to it. So something's the matter with it, and I'm damned

if I can figure what."

Pink said, "That means what?"

"Means that if Fawcett or any of his men are out there, we won't know it. We could flash right by them, or through 'em for that matter, and never know it."

"Nothing more serious, though?"

"That's bad enough, isn't it?" Jerry asked him.

"Sure, sure." Pink shook himself. "I feel — I guess *wary* is the word." Jerry looked a question. "Yeah," said Pinkham uncomfortably, "it's the Martian. A nice guy and all, but he makes me wonder."

"Four thousand years plus," nodded Jerry.

"No, not that. I think that's possible. It's something else, son."

"What?"

Pink said slowly, futilely, "I don't know." He patted the O.O.'s shoulder. "Keep at it, Jerry." He went out and walked down the long ramp to the astrolab. Daley was there. "How's it going?" Pink asked him.

"We aren't moving," said the lieutenant.

"I know. I told Kinkare to put her into the same orbit as the asteroid belt. We want to stay in the same relation to the planetoids till we decide where to look for Fawcett."

"I know you issued those orders,

Pink. I meant we aren't in the orbit. We're hanging in space, and the dang asteroids are shooting past us." Daley flipped on his great banks of scanners. "See?" Bands of light were tiny balls of inert matter, flashing by an obviously stationary *Elephant's Child*.

Pink jumped for the intercom. "No use," said Daley. "It's dead. I sent Calico for Randy Kinkare." They looked at each other. "I think it's Ynohp," said Daley.

Pinkham took out a pad and pencil. Without saying anything, without admitting to himself that he agreed with his officer, he put down a number of figures. Then he said, "I left Ynohp just fourteen minutes ago in his stateroom. I've put down the distances he'd have to travel to reach all the things that have gone wrong since then. He could have done it — if he was invisible, and could move at the rate of two hundred feet per second."

"Maybe he can."

"You know Martians have the same rate of speed, roughly speaking, as Terrestrians."

"And if Ynohp isn't a Martian at all?"

"Washington, did you ever see a Martian?"

"Yeah."

"Could anything in the universe make itself look like a four-foot-

tall, four-armed, slate-gray man with pink eyes?"

"I don't know," said Daley. "Maybe there's something in System Ninety that can. Hypnotism, matter transference, fluidity or a lot of other facts could explain it."

Kinkare and Bill Calico came in on the run.

Their news didn't surprise Pink greatly.

The space drive was out of commission.

They were adrift in the void.

CHAPTER IV

THE intercom, the space drive, the life-scanner. So far apart that one man *couldn't* have put them out of whack. No one connected in any way with the others. Ynohp snoring gently in his stateroom. Pinkham, Daley, Silver, Kinkare, Jerry Jones, Calico, and the girl, all gathered in the Captain's quarters, tense, baffled, and all talking at once.

And out of the hubbub, one clear sweet voice saying something that didn't make sense and yet electrified Pink as if he'd put his hand on a lighted cigar . . .

"Maybe it's the space giants?"

"Shut up!" bawled Pinkham. The officers turned toward him, brows lifting, mouths still open.

"Now," he said quietly, "Circe — Miss Smith — what did you say?"

"Space giants," she repeated "I don't think they exist, but I certainly saw something."

"Give it to us slow," said Daley.

"Well, a couple of times while I was anchored to the asteroid, watching tri-di movies, I had the impression that something enormous was floating just beyond my face plate, watching me. Of course I was slowed down so far that it must have taken me an hour to register the fact, and another hour or two to flick my eyes up away from the movies. What was a second to me was at least that long. But just once I got a clear view of something incredible. It vanished almost at once."

"What was it?"

"A very big man, naked, bald, with eyes like fires. That's the only way I can describe him. He looked humanoid, except he was so big."

"How big?"

"I can't tell and hate to make a guess — but at least a thousand feet. Of course I hadn't anything to compare him with."

"Wait a minute," said Randy Kinkare, the assistant pilot, voice reeking with disbelief. "How could you see through an opaque face plate?"

"It's not opaque," said Joe Silver officiously. "It's translucent from without and transparent from within. I took a look at it this afternoon."

"Space giants," groaned someone. "Oh, Lord!"

"We can't discount it," said Pink, realizing that he was doing just that, but refusing to disbelieve Circe. Illusion? Not a lie, surely? "She wasn't drugged, after all. She was in full control of senses that were merely slowed down."

There was a uncomfortable silence.

Intercom, space drive, life-scanner. Maybe other machinery by this time. Sabotage in such a clever way that no one of the highly skilled officers and technicians could discover how it was done, what was wrong. Space giants? Ah, come on, Pink!

Ynohp. Something wrong with him, some flaw in his looks? No, he was Martian in every oversize pore. Some anachronism?

Hey! Anachronism. Pink's mind fished up the dictionary definition. An error in chronology by which events are misplaced in regard to each other . . .

He had it.

He got to his feet, motioned Jerry and Wash Daley to go with him. They congregated outside the

door, as further talk broke out inside his quarters. He said urgently, "Remember what Ynohp said about his cataleptic state? 'Moth and rust do not corrupt.' He said it as if it were a quotation."

"It is," said Daley. "More or less word for word it's from the King James version of the Bible."

"Dated, if I remember correctly, about 1611 A.D.?"

"Yes."

"At which date the Martians had been without space flight for about 3,600 years. At which date, further, Ynohp claims to have been sitting on an asteroid for about 4,000-plus years."

"Coincidence?" asked Jerry.

Pink asked, "Do you think so?"

"Hell," said Jerry, "no."

"Let's go look at his space suit," said Daley urgently. They ran down the corridor, shoving for the lead.

Ten minutes later they sat back on their heels and stared at the interior of the suit.

Rust had corrupted here, or at any rate decay; the Martian steel, ancient and harder than any known metal, was worn to a papery shell, and in many places tiny holes had eroded clear through the suit.

"No man or Martian or anything I know except the space-eating bacteria of Pallas could have lived in that suit, cataleptic state or

not." Pink looked around at his friends. "What in the name of heaven have we brought into the ship?"

Then the three were racing for the "Martian's" stateroom. They burst in, and found that now it was empty of life.

They stood, indecisive, just outside. Pinkham's gaze went to the door, on which, as was the custom, a hastily-printed card had been placed with the officer's name upon it. He read it. Then he blinked.

"Look," he said, gesturing.

"What about it?"

The card blared its secret, its pun, at them.

Y N O H P.

"Read it backwards," said Pinkham . . .

CHAPTER V

"NONE of you thought to look at the Martian spacesuit when we'd removed it?" asked Pink. The others shook their heads. They were all in his quarters again.

"Neither did you, Captain," said Joe Silver. "You were as busy looking at the Martian as we were."

"True enough," admitted Pinkham. "Well, the thing to do first is radio the *Diogenes* and the *Cottabus* to stand by for trouble." He

lit a cigarette. "If the radio hasn't been tampered with," he said. "Silver, go tell Sparks to start sending to them. *Diogenes* is down by Planet Five, and *Cottabus* heading for Four. Tell them to look for us somewhere in the planetoid orbit. They'll have to come in on the radio beam. I don't suppose we can expect them for a day." Joe Silver gave Circe's arm an encouraging squeeze — they'd got on together pretty damn fast — and started out. "And instruct them not to pick up anybody, off asteroids or planets or out of the ether. I don't care if they see their grandmothers floating outside a spaceport."

The thought of his armada joining him made Pink feel more at ease. No sense to that, of course, but three ships are better than one, if only for moral support. "Daley," he said then, "lower the Mutiny Gates."

"You think it's wise?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't do it," he snapped. It would be the first time that a mutiny gate had been used in more than forty years. All the large ships were equipped with them, great plastikoid barriers which operated from the captain's room, sealing off the officer's sector from the rest of the ship. They had been made standard equipment in the old days, before screenings

became really effective and the danger of psychopathic trouble in the crew grew negligible. Now they were of theoretical use in case of boarding by alien life, or of damage to a large segment of the hull . . . but they had never actually been brought into play in Pinkham's lifetime. "Drop 'em," he repeated.

Daley pulled open a drawer, tugged at an unused switch, which creaked protestingly; then the brief alarm clang that heralded the fall of the forty gates sounded in the distance. "If he's beyond the gates," the senior lieutenant said heavily, "the crew may be done for."

"No more than if the gates were up," Pink told him impatiently.

"You're projecting," said Daley. "How do we know the nature of the beast? He may mop 'em up in a fit of pique at being shut out there."

"The chances are he's on our side of the walls," said Bill Calico. "Nothing out there of much importance to him. The hydroponics farm, history room, library, and so on."

"We don't know what's important to him," said Daley. "We don't know what in blazes he wants aboard. We don't know a doggone thing!"

Silver returned. "I heard the mu-

tiny gates go," he said questioningly.

"Are you all armed?" asked Pink. They nodded. "Then let's sweep the place," he said, glancing from one grim face to another. "Pick up the other officers as we go, and make a chain of inspection that he can't bust through. We'll corner him sooner or later. Then we'll see if atomic pistols will settle his hash." He looked at Circe. "You'd better stay here," he said.

"I agree," said Randy Kinkare suddenly. "And you'd best lock her in — from the outside."

"Why?" blazed the girl.

"We picked you up on an asteroid too," said the assistant pilot.

Pink, restraining himself from bashing Kinkare in the nose, said reluctantly, "You're right. We can't trust any stranger till we find out what's going on. Sorry, Circe."

"I suppose you're right." She sat down, a little flushed, eyes snapping. "Have I the right to ask for protection? I'm just as unsafe as you are, whether you believe me or not. Please leave Lieutenant Silver to guard me."

He couldn't refuse. He nodded curtly to Joe Silver, who looked too damn smug for words. So they'd paired off already? So much for his quick dream of marrying a spacegirl . . .

It had never happened to him before, though, and it was a hard dream to give up, all the more so for its abrupt flowering in a heart that heretofore had held nothing but love for the silence of the spaceways. John Pinkham, rugged, handsome, all a woman could want, had been dedicated to his profession since he was five; and many a wench had found that out to her disappointment. Now . . . oh, well. Maybe there wasn't room for space and a girl in his heart, after all. And maybe she wasn't what she seemed.

He led them into the corridor and locked the quarters behind him.

Around the first bend and up the first ramp they found Second Watch Officer Wright. They knew him by his chubby build and his uniform. They couldn't recognize his head, even when they found it three minutes later.

CHAPTER VI

THEY gathered in Sparks' radio room. That was due to the simple fact that, aside from themselves, only Sparks was alive on this side of the mutiny gates. The other officers were scattered — in the most grisly sense of the word — all over the place.

"Seven of us, if Silver's still

alive," said Daley. "Eight with the girl. Why us? He could easily have attacked us in a body." Five of the dead officers had been found in a heap, just-used pistols in their rigid hands. Atomic force was obviously useless against the thing from the asteroid.

Pink said, fighting nausea, "All the senior officers are alive. We can run the *Elephant's Child* without the eleven who died. Maybe that's why. Maybe we have to be preserved to carry this monster wherever he wants to go."

"Logical," said Jerry. "He'll have to be pretty persuasive, though. I hope he knows that."

Sparks said, "The radio's working. I had an answer from the *Cotabas* that she's heading this way. *Diogenes* hasn't replied; she must be further off."

"Evidently he doesn't care if the radio works," said Calico.

"Or else he wants the whole armada assembled," added Daley.

"I could use a drink," blurted Kinkare. "You got anything in this place, Sparks?"

"Gin on the shelf," said the radioman, pointing.

Kinkare picked up the bottle. "You always leave the cap off?"

"No! Somebody's been at it."

"Where is he?" asked Pink in a whisper.

"What, Captain?" Kinkare

stopped the bottle halfway to his lips.

"Where the devil is the brute? We combed the place. He can't have got through the mutiny gates. He can't have slipped past our chain. Where the hell is he?"

"Maybe disguised as one of us," said Daley slowly. "He isn't a Martian, but he imitated one to the last pore. Why couldn't he imitate us?"

"Well, *I'm* me," said Kinkare, and put the bottle to his mouth. Then he dropped it, screeching. Pinkham stared at him and saw his upper lip turned violent, hideous scarlet. Blood began to drip to the rug. The skin and flesh of his lip had dissolved as though sprayed with acid.

Kinkare fell to his knees, covering his face with both arms. The others sprang to help him, Sparks reaching for the medicine chest; but Pink snatched up the gin bottle. What the hell? Acid? Or —

From the square spout poured a gush of smoke, writhing sinuous in the bright indirect light of the small room; it coalesced, clotted into a body. Impossible, brain-boggling, an unreal fantasy amid the most concrete achievements of man, the thing swelled into solidity before the Captain's staring eyes.

He was eight feet tall, three broad; his eyes were brilliant ver-

million, his swollen head was egg-bald, and the expression on his coarse features was at once lecherous, evil, savage and cunning. He was stark naked, completely humanoid. And he had come out of the bottle.

A voice boomed from him like a vocalizing cannon. "I object to anyone trying to drink me!" he roared at them.

In the reeling chaos of all his beliefs gone wild, Pinkham had one sane thought, and yelled it as fast and short as he could. "Don't shoot! For God's sake, don't shoot!" Then, as Calico and Jerry held their pistols partly raised, he said urgently, "We'll only blast each other. Remember this thing's invulnerable."

The pistols were holstered with reluctance. The five pale men — Kinkare still thrashed in agony on the floor — gaped at the apparition, which said, "I am Ynohp the Martian." Gargantuan laughter rocked him. "I am your god, Earthmen. Bow down to me!"

"Damfido," said Jerry, which was evidently all he could manage to get out of "Damned if I do."

"Drop your weapons on the floor," said the being.

Pink drew his gun; casually he sighted on the great head above him, and risked one shot, which had all the effect of a sunbeam; then

he let the pistol fall. The others discarded theirs. The naked creature reached out a foot and herded the weapons into a corner. "You can't hurt me with them," he said, "but you might try suicide, and I need you. Take heart, mortals," he said, laughing, "you may get out alive!"

Then he dwindled and his lines blurred into ephemera and he slid out through the door, which was open perhaps an inch.

CHAPTER VII

"**B**UT by all that's holy," said Daley (it was an hour later, and the eight were gathered in the control room, Kinkare now bandaged and relieved of pain, but unable to speak), "if he's a brain-picker, and got his lingo out of our minds, who did he get 'take heart mortals' from?" The lieutenant glanced at Pinkham. "It may seem little, but it's minutiae that will give us clues to his nature, and therefore how to fight him. Take heart, mortals, after all. Who talks like that?"

"You're right," said Pink wearily. "It's little things we've got to look for. Like, evidently, gin bottles."

"Item," said Jerry, who was eating a sandwich. "He's composed of something alien to any life we know. Gas? I doubt it. Atomic shock

would disseminate gas. Are his molecules loose and do they edge aside for obstacles, compress together when he wants to shrink, and so on? Possible. But anyhow, he's different — and so far as we know, invulnerable."

"How did he gimmick the guns?" asked Calico, a note of desperation in his voice. "We picked them up as soon as he'd gone, and they wouldn't fire."

"Same way he gimmicked the intercom, the life-scanner, the space drive. Known hereafter as Unknown Method One."

"Another item," went on Jerry. "He talks English without using a lingoalter. Thus, probably, he's telepathic. 'Take heart mortals' he might have grubbed out of somebody's subconscious."

"It adds up to this," said Pink. "We're helpless against him. Granting this, I say let's go get him."

It made no sense, it was the gesture of fools in love with death or of madmen battling their own futility; but every officer there shouted, "Right!" Except for Joe Silver.

"I say, sit tight and wait," he said. "Something will happen. There's no use committing suicide."

"If he wants us alive, and we can't fight him, I think we're better off dead," said Jerry through his teeth.

"Hell. Where there's life there's

hope."

"I suppose you're right," said Pink slowly. His muscles ached, his hands grasped ceaselessly at the air; he was a man of action, his desire for combat throttled by incapability. "Twenty-some hours before the other ships get here. If our deductions are on the beam, he won't do anything till then. He wants the whole armada."

Then, with a snarl of static, the intercom came to life.

At first they heard a jumble of voices. "What's wrong?" "Nothing works . . ." "Are all the officers dead?" It was the crew, beyond the barriers of the mutiny gates, evidently trying to get into communication. Over and over one voice said, "Hello, Captain Pinkham. Come in, Captain Pinkham."

Pink took two strides and flipped the switch of the visiograph. Tuning it first to one crew station and then another, he told them succinctly what had happened. "Don't panic, for God's sake. The mutiny gates are for your protection. If they work, you may be able to do something later, regardless of what happens to us."

THEIR somber faces looked out of the screen at him. "Let us in, Captain," pleaded one big repairman. "We'll mob the critter."

"No use, Jackson. Stand by." He

turned the dial of the visiograph into the officers' section, scanned one room after another. No alien being appeared. "I wonder if he's in here with us?" said Pink half-aloud.

Jerry came to him. "I have an idea," he said quietly. Then he whispered at length into Pinkham's ear.

"It won't work. He knows what he's doing."

"How do we know that? If he needs us, he's ignorant of spaceships. Look at the intercom — he turned it off, by some means, then turned it on when he found out what it was. The space drive must have been easy to guess at; likewise the life-scanner. But the intercom's a lot of complex machinery that only adds up to a television-telephone communication system. However he snarls the stuff, it's instantaneous and simple for him to do. I think he just took a crack at everything that looked important. Now he's experimenting, learning the ship, finding out what he threw out of joint. Obviously he doesn't give a damn if we talk to the crew!"

"You could be right."

"So if I do what I want to, it'll confuse hell out of him. It may give us an advantage. And we'll certainly learn something."

"It's worth a try." Pink looked at

Jerry, his closest friend. "I'll send Silver to do it," he said.

Jerry shook his lean head. "This is my baby, Pink." Then he opened the door and went out, closing it behind him.

Pinkham said levelly, "Daley, come here." He whispered the plan into his lieutenant's ear. Daley said admiringly, "Good deal. And I think that's sense —he can't know much about the ship. I'll bet he was hiding in that bottle, casing Sparks's equipment and learning how to operate it. The quick look he got at the rest of us on our jobs before he started playing hob must have given him the barest, scantiest idea of things. So Jerry's notion could work."

"Or it could blow up," said Pink dismally. "Go tell the others. Whisper it, in case our guest is in here." He struggled briefly with his deepest feelings. "Don't tell Circe. We can't be sure of her yet."

"Roger." Daley left him alone at the intercom. Pinkham set the dial to show the large room toward which Jerry was making his way . . .

Somewhere beyond their ken, the incredible beast from the void made another decision, or tried another experiment; and the life-scanner flickered into working order again. Joe Silver saw it first. Its screen blinked, then its alarm buttons glowed vividly. Without the ship,

at a vast distance but approaching rapidly, were an untold number of organic entities, life-sources that reacted upon the scanner like approaching aircraft on a radar set. They could be spaceships, slug-jet suits, or anything that contained the intangible thing called life. And the sister ships of the *Elephant's Child* were still too far away to register.

"Great Jupiter!" bellowed Joe Silver, pointing. "What now?"

CHAPTER VIII

O. O. Jerry Jones crept along the last ramp. Why the devil was he skulking like this? Habit, he grinned ruefully to himself; the habit of primitive man who crouched and slunk in the presence of danger, no matter what kind.

And the old preservation instinct was also giving him all sorts of reasons to knock this silly business off, and go back to the protection, however illusory, of the control room. For instance, said the sly instinct, if this alien is telepathic, as you so neatly proved to yourself, then doesn't he know all that you and your pals know about a spaceship?

Shut up, Jerry told himself. I was wrong. He can't be telepathic, or he wouldn't bother to keep us

alive after he's combed our brains.

"Couldn't he have some physical use for you all?" said the instinct.

Get thee behind me, Satan, he growled in his mind.

He opened the door of the room he was seeking.

Where to start? One wall was banked with books; never mind them. Another wall was covered with strange-looking projections, tubes and spouts and wheels and levers, behind a long table of plastikoid. There? Good enough.

He had a momentary pang as he picked up a spanner from the rack of tools by the door . . .

Then he was across the room and smashing wildly at levers, spouts, wall tanks, faucets; beating metal into scrap, crushing shining aluminum to scarred uselessness; he did not rest his arm until the whole wall was a ruin of beaten metal and broken glass. Then he turned his attention to the third wall.

Here was a giant turntable, rack on rack of shellacked alloy discs, mysterious-appearing charts and cabalistic signs. These he wrecked as methodically and ruthlessly as he had the first, but now there were tears glistening in his eyes. He ended the destruction with a moan of sorrow.

He paused to snap on the intercom. Pink's worry-lined face ap-

peared. "How'm I doing?" Jerry asked his captain.

"Great so far. Calico is crying like a child."

"I have news for you," Jerry said. "So am I." Then he turned to the last wall. Before it spread a long array of mechanical devices: large boxes on spindly legs, with glassed tops and brilliant colors splashed across their surfaces; taller, narrower cases with crooked levers and viewplates on which were small designs and words. There was a kind of double cage with tiny cubes therein. There were great wheels with many numbers. Almost all were attached to the wall by electric cords, though some were entirely mechanical and others ran on self-generated power. Jerry began at one end and passed down the line, shattering glass and snapping wooden legs with his spanner.

He had almost finished when the door burst open and the tall humanoid form of the stranger appeared. A blast of rage almost lifted Jerry off his feet. The being came at him, its motion a flowing tigerish pounce. The spanner was twitched from his hand flung across the room. He backed against the wall, bloating with fear in spite of himself. The creature swelled above him.

"Whoreson knave!" it bawled angrily. "What are you doing?"

"Making d-d-damn sure you don't take the ship anywhere," said Jerry, croaking a little. "Now t-try and run it!"

He was suddenly lifted off his feet and dangled helplessly a yard off the floor. "Fix them," snarled the alien thing into his face. He had time to realize that its grip was extremely powerful, whatever its molecules and atoms might be made of. "Reconstruct them, or you die."

"Don't be an idiot," Jerry told it, making up his mind that he was as good as dead and might as well go out like a man. "There isn't a single spare part aboard for any of these devices." He managed a sick grin. "If you're so smart, you know I'm telling the truth."

Pinkham called from the screen of the intercom. "That's true, whatever-you-are. Those things are useless to you now."

The alien took Jerry by the chest, wrapping one hand around his back to do it; slowly it exerted pressure, and Jerry realized that it must have elongated the hand enormously to encompass him so. He also knew that his rib cage would shortly collapse. He shrieked.

Then Circe, the girl from the asteroid, was gazing from the screen, horrified. "No!" she screamed at the being. "You can't kill him for only wrecking the —"

"Shut up!" squealed Jerry.

"The recreation room!" she finished.

Abruptly he was dropped to the floor, where he lay gasping, massaging his bruised sides. The thing above him said, "Recreation room?"

"Sure. The soda fountain, the phonograph, and the pinball machines and games."

Then Pinkham had encircled her throat with one arm, clamped his other hand on her mouth, and dragged her back. But the damage was done.

The alien gave another of those mirthless peals of bull's laughter. "Clever," he said. "Oh, clever little man." Then he plucked Jerry off the floor once more.

I'm going to die now . . .

The brute set him on his feet, twisted him toward the door, and gave him a brisk, forceful pat on the backside that sent him staggering. He gained his balance and ran into the corridor. It was more humiliating than had he been slain.

CHAPTER IX

“It didn't work, but it taught us a few things."

"You're right. It taught us that this bitch can't be trusted. Either she's in league with *it*, a sister

or brother of it, or else she's so stupid that she's a menace to our survival."

"Oh, you blithering jackass!" said Circle indignantly to her fellow organicus officer. "How could I guess what your plan was? Nobody told me. All I knew was that you were going to be murdered for doing a perfectly harmless —"

"She's right," said Joe Silver. "We ought to have told her."

"Shut up," said Pinkham savagely. "Any more of that and I'll figure she's corrupted you or addled your brains, and I'll toss you into the brig, Silver."

"You try it you pigsqueak," shouted Silver, who measured half an inch over Pink's six-foot-three. "Captain or not, this is a grade A emergency and we're all needed. I'll pull the Mars Convention on you if you try to shut me up."

"He's right," said Daley to the captain. "Mars Convention says that in a grade A emergency any officer above Second Watch is equal to the captain or commander, Pink." Then he turned to Silver, grinned, and lashing out with a hand the size of a spaniel, caught his under-lieutenant on the ear. It knocked Silver sprawling. "That's for slanging at your superiors," he said quietly. "And the Mars Convention says I can do that."

Silver got up and blinked. He seemed dazed and for the first time in his space life, uncertain of himself. He looked at the others and recognized himself as a minority here. "Okay," he said, "okay, I'm outvoted. But I say the girl is only suspect, by no means convicted of anything but ignorance of the plan."

Kinkare, unable to speak through his bandaged mouth, nodded strongly. Circe glared defiance at Pinkham. "Next time, for God's sake tell me what you have in mind," she said. "Not that I'd let you sacrifice poor Jerry, anyway."

"Women," said Jerry. "Women on a ship. Jonahs. Sentimental imbeciles."

"I'll knock your teeth down your scrawny throat," began Joe Silver, and "Quiet!" roared Pinkham. "We're quarreling like kids. What's to be done now!"

"I was saying it taught us a few things," said Daley. "Let's figure them out. The thing's evidently not telepathic. It can't run a spaceship, or it wouldn't have been so worked up over the ruin of the soda fountain, which must have looked pretty vital to its inexperienced eyes. It's definitely tangible, for it picked Jerry up."

"It also murdered eleven men," said Pink. "That's tangible en-

ough too."

"It's damned intelligent, for it must have spotted Jerry on the intercom, which means it was working it. It also speaks a very funny breed of English. 'Whoreson knave,' for example. Nobody here ever called anyone that."

"Whoreson knave is Shakespearian," said Jerry.

"And, to finish what I've deduced, the monster is as strong as a couple of men, at least." He grinned at Jerry. "Not that you needed me to deduce that."

Randy Kinkare was staring at the life-scanner screen. Now he beat a tattoo on the arm of his chair, pointed so that they all looked. The flecks of light that indicated organic life had thronged in toward the ship; not so numerous as the stars, they were still too many to count. One object on the screen was large now, large enough to be identified. It approached the ship at a slow but steady rate, and they gasped as they saw it was another of the human-like figures.

"His brothers," said Pinkham. "That must be their natural form, then."

It grew and grew. It seemed it must now be touching the scanner's outside cell; but no, it grew even greater. At last it could not be seen in its entirety, then only its face showed. It was a hideous face,

twisted with sardonic malice. The face grew. When it stopped, only one enormous eye filled the screen.

Jerry cleared his throat. "Do you know what that means?" he asked. "It means that, at a conservative estimate, the critter is —"

"Go on," said Daley impatiently, when Jerry's silence had lengthened intolerably.

"It must be at least one thousand feet tall," said the O. O.

There was a long, unbroken stillness, a hush of horror and disbelief in the control room.

Finally Circe said slowly, "I think I'm going to faint."

And she did.

CHAPTER X

THE long-unused armaments room was half the width of the ship away. They went toward it silently, seven men and a girl, praying that their visitor would not meet them or spot their furtive advance on the intercom. They slunk into the gunroom and Pink, coming last, ran the heavy emergency bolt across the door behind him.

The armaments officer was dead, of course. Pink said quietly, "Who knows the principles of these weapons?" Daley and Joe Silver raised their hands. "Activate the viewers, then."

Two walls darkened and became the silver-flecked night of space; it was as if they had become suddenly transparent. Half a dozen of the void-giants showed near the *Elephant's Child*, hovering or slowly drifting around the bow of the ship.

"Now," said the captain, "if only our friend in the bottle has left us our guns — train 'em on those monstrosities and fire every forward battery simultaneously."

The lieutenants, seated in foam-chairs behind the double banks of the gun controls, manipulated instruments that were very like the sights on common atom-pistols. Thin blue lines moved across the reflected picture of the space beyond the ship's nose, steadied and centered on the nearest giants. Silver glanced at Daley, who said, "Count o' three, Joe."

Every man leaned forward, scowling at the screens. The nearest space-soarer squinted full in their faces, as though he could actually see them as they were scanning him. Coincidence, but — Pink shuddered.

"One," said Daley. "Two."

The *Elephant's Child* rocked wildly up and back as thirty platinum guns, the heaviest type in the known universe, fired their hell-projectiles — great shells whose inconceivable destructive power was

released by the splitting of the curium atom. In flight, the ship would have absorbed the tremendous recoil automatically; stationary as she was, it bucked her over like a blown leaf.

The shells, set to explode at the very closest range that safety permitted, flashed upon the twin screens like bursting suns. Human eyes looking directly at such a bombardment would have crisped in their sockets; even on the screens their glare was too bright for comfort.

The men blinked, peered sharply for signs of the effect on the giants.

Pink felt disappointment, so biting and gut-curdling that he nearly vomited. For at first the shells seemed to have had little effect except to hurl the giants back a mile or so from the ship. Then, as they slowly surged forward toward it again, he saw that they had not escaped whole.

One lacked an arm; another had half his head blown away; a third drifted in without the lower half of his torso. The expressions of their bronze-yellow faces were not of pain, however, but only of rage.

"Hey!" bellowed Calico. "We nicked 'em up, anyway!"

"Look again," said Daley morosely, standing from his foam-chair. "Look at the head of the far left skunk."

IMAGINATION

He who had lost half his cranium was slowly regenerating it, the brow and cheek pressing outward to form new firm outlines, a missing eye gradually emerging from the bloodless tatters of the old socket. Pink said, "Well." He took a deep breath. "Well, that's that. Let's all get out and plink at them with bean-shooters. It'll do as much harm." All the giants were reconstituting their lost parts.

Now one monster, floating right up to the ship, wrapped his five-hundred-feet-long arms around it and gave it a shake. It was as if a man had rattled a box full of beetles. The officers of the *Elephant's Child*, who had ridden through the bucking of the tremendous explosion, were unprepared for this movement, for they had risen from their deep seats. They sprawled across the room, smashing up against the wall with bone-jarring thumps. Pinkham found himself entangled with Circe Smith in a pretzel of arms and legs that would under other circumstances have been ridiculous but pleasurable. Fearing for her safety, he grasped her around the waist; she yielded to him a moment, then struggled back and stood up. Was her face flushed with indignation, fright, or —? He got to his own feet. The giant had released the ship.

"We are chastened," murmured

Jerry, feeling a bruised shin.

"And now what?" asked Joe Silver. "Ordinary weapons are as much use to us as spitballs." He sat down. "Let's figure out what else to try. Somewhere there's an answer."

They all sat down, Pink said, "Remember Wolf 864?"

"Sure," said Daley, who had been on that expedition with Pinkham when they were young cubs out of jetschool. "Friendly natives, kind of vegetable-animal life, and we murdered half of them unintentionally. We had to get out and never go back."

"How?" asked Circe. "How did you kill them?"

"Germs. The common ordinary non-toxic germs we carry in our systems all the time. It was a massacre — and of a queer, sweet kind of beast. They had no tolerance for our microbes."

"I volunteer to find the alien and breathe in his face," said Jerry. "Somebody hand me an onion," he added.

The conversation went on. It grew aimless to Pink, a bunch of boys whistling by a graveyard, eight prisoners speculating on their escape when they had no real knowledge of their jailer. He fiddled with the intercom, saw that the crew had gathered by the mutiny gates and were waiting ten-

sely, puny weapons in their hands. He spoke a few words of encouragement to them. 57 men — whom he hated to see die. Somehow he had to save them.

It was about half an hour afterwards that he first discovered he was breathing too shallowly.

CHAPTER XI

“WHAT is it?” asked Circe.

Her lovely face was a trifle pallid. “I feel odd — and you all look pale.”

Then it struck Pink. None of the others, even Daley, had recognized what was happening. He did not dare waste a second in telling them. He tore the door open and leaped into the corridor.

Deliberately he tried to draw as much oxygen into his lungs as he could. It was growing rarer every instant; but never mind trying to conserve it — the life of everyone aboard depended on his reaching the atmospheria. For the air in the spaceship was rapidly degenerating, becoming unbreathable as what remained of the good stuff was inhaled and thrown off as useless gases . . .

Either the atmospheric system had gone on the blink by itself, he thought, which was a hell of a long shot and too much of a coincidence, or else the alien, experi-

menting, had turned it off by accident.

Maybe the brute didn’t need oxygen. Of course he didn’t! His brothers outside sure didn’t have any. Then, if he were independent of it, but could stand living in it, the probabilities were that he didn’t breathe at all; that his metabolism was geared to ignore the elements in which he lived.

Just possibly he was taking this way to kill them off in a particularly fiendish fashion.

Silently Pink cursed the architect who had designed the *Elephant’s Child* with the armaments room in the bow and the atmospheria back near the crew’s sector, a thousand feet of passageways off. Every door he flung open took another bit of strength from his aching limbs. As he passed a mirror, he had a glimpse of his face. His face was flushed now, the grim-set lips were bluish, his eyes seemed to bulge from his head.

He began breathing through his mouth. It may have been imagination, but he thought the air had a foul taste, like a sea full of putrid fish.

Pink fell to his knees. Abruptly his strength had waned to almost nothing. He was horrified to realize how swiftly the air was going bad. He had to get to the system! He struggled up, staggered for-

IMAGINATION

ward like a drunk. His heart, pounding wildly a moment before, now seemed to be slowing, weakening.

He found himself singing . . .

*"Blast off at two, jet down at
three*

*On the dead dry dusty sphere
What sort of a life is this for
me,*

A veteran rocketeer?"

Great God, was he crazy? Singing, shouting the words to that old song that Circe had brought back to his mind. Using up what amounted to his last drops of energy and air. God, God, help me, he thought wildly; make me shut up. But the maddened outer part of his brain kept him singing.

*"I, who have seen the flame-
dark seas,
Canals like great raw scars,
And the claret lakes and the
crimson trees*

In the rich red soil of Mars!"

Then he fell, and this time he could not get up.

He would lie here and die, horribly, gasping for breath where there was nothing to breathe but death. The mind that had made him sing, that had thought of Circe longingly and of what he must do to save her and all his friends,

that blacked out, fell into a pit of ebony walls and ink at the bottom, blackness and nothing left anywhere . . .

SOMEWHERE deep in his skull, some unknown cranny blazed with the light of knowledge. He had only a few yards to go. He had to make it. This knowledge crept out and through his body, raised cold swollen hands and made them grasp at a wall, forced the feet of this dead man to scrabble for purchase on the floor of the passage. Pinkham knew that he was moving, but it was as if he were sitting on a distant planet and knowing it; there was no realization that this was he, Captain Pinkham, clawing upward and shoving himself on. He looked at himself curiously, rather proud and a little contemptuous. What a fool, what a damn fool, he thought.

Here was a door. The half-blind thing that was Pink groped for the handle, recognizing dimly that if this were not the atmospheria, then it was all over.

He opened the door and fell at full length on the carpet. Instinct rolled him over and hauled him to his knees, and he said admiringly and far away on that planet of death, By God, this is a man! Through a red haze he saw that he was in the first of the two small

rooms that made up the atmospherea. He lunged forward, falling, jerked convulsively upward, plunged down a mile and smashed his face into the carpet, felt pain that for a moment brought him out of his stupor. He was making for the master switch that controlled the nitrogen-oxygen-ozone-et-cetra that poured continuously through the great ship when all was well. From a great distance he could see that the switch was shoved up; only by breaking a steel band of superb tensility could the alien creature have pushed that switch up, for Pink carried the key to the band on his master ring, hanging at his belt. It looked like viciousness, either of knowledge that this was the humans' finish, or of ignorance flaring into anger. What a *beast*

He gathered himself like a mortally wounded lion. He launched his perishing frame at the switch, hands clawed to drag it down to the normal position.

He could not feel whether he even touched the wall, for his senses were obliterated. He lay on his face and knew that he would not get up again.

Idly, he wondered whether he had managed to reach the switch.

Then the final flame of intelligence winked out, and it was night and unrelieved blackness, and he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XII

JERRY blinked. He opened his eyes and blinked again.

Had Pink made it to the atmospheria?

He must have, for the air was sweet and normal once more. So either Pink or Joe Silver had saved them. The others had all dropped along the way; he had passed Daley's motionless form some yards back there—now he looked, and saw the senior lieutenant sitting up against the wall.

Jerry rubbed his forehead gingerly. What a headache!

By the time he managed to stand, shakily, Joe Silver had appeared in front of him. Before Jerry could ask questions, the big man said hoarsely, "Must have been the captain. I passed out before I made the door." He shook his own head, which evidently ached too. "The blasted door is now locked. I can't get in."

The three of them went toward the atmospheria, Calico and Sparks following slowly. Before they reached it, the door opened and the alien thing emerged, stooping to clear the lintel. In its tree-thick arms lay Pinkham, apparently lifeless, his head dangling.

"Aside, mortals," the beast mouthed at them, and added, grotesquely, "goddammit!" They

dropped back, it passed them and turned a corner and vanished. "Wait," said Daley urgently, "don't follow it yet." He switched on the passage intercom screen. "We'll spy on it with this. If Pink's alive, we mustn't anger the brute."

Tense, they watched the image of the stranger as it prowled through the ship, carrying their chief. It passed Randy Kinkare, and they saw him shrink away, a noise of terror gurgling in his gullet. The lipless Kinkare had reason to be afraid.

The giant took Pinkham into his own quarters and laid him on a foamcouch. Then it sat down in an angle of the wall, and its gruesomely human-like body swelled until it occupied much of the free space in the cabin.

"To scare him if he wakes," breathed Bill Calico.

"Isn't it frightful enough?" asked Jerry. "I have an idea: if the Rabelaisian types outside are at their normal size, which seems logical, then this one may be uncomfortable, having to go around all compressed to eight feet."

"Could be . . . let's advance," said Daley. "We'll wait just outside Pink's door. Then if it tries anything—"

"Yeah?"

"We'll make a protest," finish-

ed Daley. "Somehow, we'll make a strong protest."

They left the screen, a few seconds before Captain Pinkham groaned and opened his eyes.

The alien regarded him with its habitual expression of overpowering slyness. "Why did you nearly die?" it asked. "Was it something I did?"

When Pink could trust himself to speak without gibbering—it was horrifying to see half his room filled by this bronze-yellow balloon of evidently solid flesh—he said, "Naturally it was something you did, you big ape. You turned off our air."

"Air?" It compressed its lips. "Ah, I remember air. A substance needed on Earth for life. We never understood it."

"Don't you breathe?" asked Pink. "Don't you take any element into your system and mix it with your blood and then—oh, you haven't any blood." He paused. "But don't you need *any* outside element to sustain life?"

"No. Nor do we eat."

"But you are organic life?"

"Of course. A life which you cannot understand, I see. A life impervious to anything beyond it, indestructible and eternal."

I think you're lying, said Pink to himself. Nothing in the universe is indestructible . . . or at

any rate, unalterable. Everything has its Achilles heel, even the atom.

THE monster spoke, half to itself. "That, the locked switch was the air, then. I thought it was the air-lock." It laughed. Pink thought it had a pretty primitive sense of humor. "Not the air-lock, but the air."

"You wanted to let your friends into the ship," accused Pink. The beast nodded. "Didn't you know that opening the air-locks without sealing off their compression rooms would kill all the humans aboard?"

"No," it said. "I want you alive. Some of you. To teach us the working of this rocket."

"Spaceship," corrected Pink without thinking. Then, "Why do you want the ship?"

Its eyes glowed fire at him. "To return to Earth," it hissed. "To return to our own planet!"

"Your planet!"

"As much as yours, mortal." It leaned forward, obscuring practically all the room for him. "Show me how to open the air-locks," it said.

"In a swine's eye."

"With safety to yourself, naturally," it said impatiently. "Come, show me."

"Find the machinery yourself. Experiment. Knock us all off.

You'll be stuck out here with a ship you can't operate."

It plucked him off the foam-couch and hurled him against the wall, jarring him in every bone. "Show me how," it roared. "Thou zed, thou cream-faced loon—" Shakespeare? wondered Pink—"show me the controls!"

Pink dived behind a stationary chair. He drew his useless pistol and threw it at the being's face; it rebounded to the floor. He snatched up a vase of ever-blooming Jovian lilies, sent them after the gun. The monster reached for him, snarling. He leaped over its hand, hurdling it as if he were a boy crossing a fence. On the far wall were many weapons.

When he made Captain, and was given the *Elephant's Child* as his flagship, he had transferred all his belongings to it, so that nowhere in the galaxies would he ever feel at home save here. Among his keepsakes was the collection of antique weaponry handed down to him by his father, whose grandfather had bought them in the long ago from many museums. Gradually he had added to the collection, souvenirs of the planets he had explored. They were bracketed on the wall. Zulu war clubs and Kentucky muskets. Martian spear-guns and antiquated jet-pistols; a Derringer, a Colt .44, a blowpipe

from an unknown Pacific island.

The alien giant was too swollen to turn swiftly. Pink reached the wall display. He tore down an assegai, whirled and thrust it at the monstrous, contorted face, searching for the eyes.

He was a mouse, be-deviling a cat with a broom straw. The thing batted his spear aside, brushed him with its fingers in a powerful swat, smashed him against his desk. A corner caught him, and he felt a rib snap. The pain enraged him.

IN that desk he kept his other collection, ammunition for those weapons: it was his boast that he had at least six rounds for every projectile-thrower there. Some of it had been painstakingly fashioned in modern times from the old formulae, some miraculously preserved through the centuries. On strange planets he and Jerry used to have target practice with the ancient toys.

Now the agony and the fear forced him into a gesture. He would die in this room, for certainly he'd never tell the giant where to find the air-lock switches; he had to go down fighting, and if to fight this impervious lout was the most futile of gestures, at least he would make it a glorious one!

Fumbling, he tore open a draw-

er and clutched a box out of it. This was the ammunition for the Colt revolver. Gripping it in his left hand, he jumped aside as the beast put out a hand for him. He fled across the room, his ears cringing from the titanic yells of fury behind him. Now he had to get the Colt .44 from the wall.

It took him three horrible minutes of dodging and bounding to reach the weapons again. He snatched at the revolver, missed, made another desperate grab as he dropped to the rug; the second time he had it. He crawled under a chest which stood twenty inches off the floor. Luckily the alien was trying to catch him, not slay him, for it could long since have smeared him into jelly with a piece of furniture for a bludgeon.

Feverishly he loaded the chambers of the Colt. For a moment his scattered wits could not recollect just how to operate this special weapon. Then he remembered.

The fingers of the monster, sausagel-sized and disgusting in their parody of humanity, came groping beneath the chest. Pinkham wormed back and came up behind it, staring into the red eyes.

With a concentration of power that he had not known he could summon, he shot out from behind the chest and vaulted onto the top

of his enormous desk.

The alien, lips curling, straightened till its head brushed the ceiling. It reached out for him.

In the last split second, Pink had a vision of himself, and instead of a glorious gesture, it seemed to him suddenly that he was making an awful ass of himself. Like a man before a firing squad thumbing his nose . . .

Nevertheless, he aimed the Colt full into the gargantuan face before him, and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER XIII

THE dawn-man, a thing like a wet rat, bared its teeth at the dinosaur . . . The Cro-Magnon faced a horde of hulking Neanderthals with a grin . . . The Crusader stood with a broken sword and brandished the hilt at the charging Saracens . . . The Apache drew his knife to fight a double-troop armed with carbines . . . The American flung his empty M-1 in the faces of forty Japanese . . . *toujours le beau geste*. Captain Pinkham, standing in his cabin aboard the spaceship *Elephant's Child* adrift in Star System Ninety, leaned forward and pulled the trigger to the two-century-old, outmoded, laughable popgun of a Colt .44 firing once and twice and again and again into the face of the

bronze-yellow space-dwelling giant.

The being loomed over him, and a scream like the death-wail of a meteor lanced into his eardrums and made him gasp with anguish. He pumped the last slug into the enemy and launched himself side-long, without much hope of landing anywhere but in a bushel-sized palm. He was actually surprised when he found himself on the rug. He scrambled for cover, but before he reached it, it dawned on him that he might not need it.

The alien had sunk to its knees, was making a convulsive effort to rise but obviously lacked the strength! Somehow, and God alone knew how, Pinkham had wounded the beast!

He drew back to the wall, watching. The agony of the big humanoid was doubling it over and throwing it upright as though a volcano were erupting in its belly. It flung out an arm, struck a foamchair, which shattered explosively. Pink put more feet between them. The convulsions were like those of a harpooned whale. Yet the creature did not seem able to move from its knees. Finally, perhaps a minute after the first throes, it collapsed all at once, a crumpled titan. Pink cautiously opened the door, just as Daley was reaching for the handle.

"What in hell did you *do?*?" shouted the lieutenant.

"Shot him with a revolving-chamber pistol of the mid-19th Century," said Pink. His rib was hurting and his flesh felt bruised all over. He grinned. "Figure that one, boy. Atomic disintegrator doesn't work, antique powder-using firearm does. I'm too beat to know why."

"It's crazy," said Joe Silver flatly. They all stood around the alien, which was sprawled on its back. The red eyes gleamed, but no muscle moved in the great body. They looked for signs of the wounds, for holes or dissolving matter, for anything different; there was nothing. "What if—" began Silver.

"This can wait." Pink took a deep breath, which hurt, and cleared his throat. "There's plenty to be done. Jerry, check your scanner and detectors for possible damage. Sparks, get on the radio to *Cottabus* and *Diogenes*; tell 'em everything, and warn them to come in cautiously. Kinkare, Daley, see what you can do with the space drive."

He walked to the chest and picked up the box of Colt cartridges. He loaded the weapon again. "This works—and for now I'm not asking why. I'll stay with this scum of the void and try to get

something out of him that'll clear things up. Bill, you determine our position and give it to Sparks; then start checking all the other equipment for bugs." He looked at Joe Silver. "You collect the bodies of the dead officers and prepare them for space burial."

"Why me?" blurted Silver.

Pink gave him a long look. "Because it's an officer's job. Because I tell you so. And Silver—"

"Yeah?"

"I have decided that this is no longer a grade A emergency."

Joe Silver said stiffly, "Yes, sir."

PINK activated the intercom screen, told the crew briefly what had happened. Then he raised the mutiny gates, giving a sigh of relief. "Get going," he told his officers.

"What about the girl?" asked Jerry suspiciously. "She could still be one of them."

"Leave her with me. I have six bullets in this thing and forty-eight more after that." He looked at Circe, who was pale and weary. "Sit down, O. O. Smith," he said gently. "I think you're all right. But you realize we can't chance anything till we have proof."

"I understand," she said listlessly, and dropped into a foamseat,

staring at the fallen giant. The others trooped out.

With the door shut, Pink walked to the head of the creature; it was a swollen and hideous head, but by rights it should have been even more hideous, should have had half a dozen wounds. The yellow hide was unmarked. Pink said, "You're alive. Can you speak?"

"Certainly." The lips barely moved. "I am but immobilized for the moment."

"What caused it?"

The being sneered at him without answering. Pink said, "I can keep you in this state for a long time, chum. And when we've shown our heels to your brothers, I'm going to dump you out an airlock and let you drift around between the stars."

He knelt beside it. "What did you do to the space drive?"

There was a long pause. Then it evidently made up its mind. "The drive should be in working order now. Your men will discover so when they try it. As with the other contrivances, I merely placed a temporary stasis on the protons of certain atoms, which rendered them futile. There should be no damage by this time."

Echoing his words, Pink heard the first throbbing murmur of the activated piles. He looked without conscious volition at Circe, and

they exchanged smiles of vast relief.

"You'll be popping out that airlock sooner than I'd hoped," said Pink to the giant. Then he was startled by a great peal of harsh laughter.

"Oh, you pigmy!" shouted the alien. "You flea-brained besotted fool! Your ship is out of control even now, and your hours are numbered on one hand. You've lost, and haven't the brains to see why!"

And, thought Pink, listening to the mirthless laugh while a chill sought out his belly, the monster's words did not sound remotely like a bluff.

He knew something hidden from the captain, and even in his captivity he felt himself master of the *Elephant's Child*.

Why? Why? Why?

Then Pink turned and looked at Circe.

CHAPTER XIV

PINK woke from a sweating nightmare. He rolled over and his bandaged ribs creaked with a twinge. He had slept nearly a round of the clock; the other ships must be nearing the asteroids. He got up and dressed quickly, wondering who was watching Circe now, holding the revolver on her, praying that if she should change

form, the old-fashioned gun would paralyze her as it had the giant.

The giant. He had to check on that devil immediately. He called his quarters on the intercom, and Lieutenant Daley's image waved at him reassuringly. The monstrous entity had not moved; its eyes still gleamed with malevolence.

"Your hours are numbered on one hand," said Pinkham to himself. "How many fingers on that mitt, I wonder?"

And even yet he did not believe the thing had been bluffing.

He ate a brisk breakfast in the mess hall, then stalked off to his own room, trying to analyze what he now knew of the giants' nature; but Circe's face intruded in his mind. He was in love with her. If she were an alien, then he was in love with the remarkable illusion she had created, of beauty and something more: of a deep integrity of soul that shone in her eyes and touched every word she uttered. And if that were an illusion, then he was a cynic and quite likely a positive misanthrope from this day forward.

"Get a slug of coffee," he told Daley. "Then hare back and we'll have some brandy. It looks like a busy day." Daley went out, giving him the Colt as he left.

Sparks reported the *Cottabus* and *Diogenes* had joined their

routes and would be alongside within half an hour. Pink sat down and looked at Circe, asleep on the couch. He switched his gaze after a while to the enemy, who watched him steadily. It said, "A favor, Captain."

"No," he told it.

"Only a sip, a drop of brandy to wet these cold lips!"

"Cold lips, cold heart: old proverb." For the first time in his life, Pinkham wanted to torture someone. "You bastard," he said grimly, "you murdered eleven men, eleven good officers, and spoiled Kinkare's face for him. And you want a drink of brandy."

"Rubbing alcohol, then. Only a touch on my mouth. Drop it in my eye if you wish," said the thing pitifully.

"No—hey, wait a second. You told me your breed doesn't eat or drink. You don't need any outside element. Why the alcohol?"

It heaved what was possibly a sigh. "I can absorb certain portions of the carbon atoms of *al-kuhl*," it said. "It is the greatest pleasure known to my race. And, save for the paltry drops of gin in that bottle yesterday, I have not—let us say 'tasted'—it for some hundreds of years!"

"*Al-kuhl?*" repeated Pinkham.

"The Arabic slips easily from my tongue after all those years,"

said the thing, half to itself.

"Arabic! "You weren't lying," said Pink, "when you told us you came from Earth, then."

"I was not lying. Give me some alcohol, Captain."

"No. How do I know it won't revive you?"

"My word on it."

Pink gave the hardest and briefest bark of laughter ever heard on the spaceways. It became silent. Finally he leaned forward to stare at it. "Your eyes have faded," he said. "By God, I think you aren't paralyzed. I think you're dying!"

After another silence it said, "Yes. I am dying."

"I couldn't be happier," said Pinkham viciously. "I even hope it's painful."

"It is not. The only pain came with the passage through my molecules of the l—" it halted abruptly.

"Ah," said Pink, hefting the Colt. "Of the lead. It had to be that, of course; but thanks for reassuring me. Your tribe's allergic to lead in a rather high degree."

THE flames leaped in its eyes.

"I haven't told you anything so valuable," it said, with a kind of weak bravado. "There are too many of us, too few of you, and not enough lead in this whole system to conquer us. You have found the secret, but you'll never

carry it back to Earth. My people shall go there instead, when they have sucked the methods from your broken body."

"When will you die?" he asked it. In spite of his hatred, humanity was rising in him. It was beaten and he was too much of a man to cower for long.

"I hear remorse in your tone," said the alien. "For the love of God; then, give me some alcohol."

He remembered the headless corpse of Wright. He said, "No."

Perhaps a quarter of an hour passed. It began to talk to itself in a monotone, a sort of feverish delirium.

"I never thought of it, at least not often, for I steered my mind away from it; but once a decade or every thirty years I would remember, perhaps one of us would say, "Oh, to have a flagon of palm wine,' and then the agony of desire would wrack me until I must fight my body and tear it proton from proton so that I hurt badly and the remembrance would leave me. *Al-kuhl, al-kuhl!* Why in all the universe must there be this one combination of stupid elements which drags every fleck of yearning from me like water wrung from a cloth? My race needs nothing, nothing—we long for nothing—we are the only self-sufficient beings in creation—why do we remember the

al-kuhl?"

"Like a *keef-smoker*," said Pinkham quietly. "You don't long for anything else." After a little he added, "And you fear nothing save lead."

"True," said the being distractedly. "If it were not for lead and alcohol we would be perfect gods."

"Who are you?" Pink asked, conscious that his throat was constricted with excitement. "When did you leave Earth? Why don't I recognize you, out of history? What are you called?"

He had tried too hard. The alien rolled its dimmed eyes at him. "I wish I could smile now," it said through motionless lips. "Ah, if I could only smile knowingly! You will die today with that curiosity unslaked."

He was balefully angry at that; he leaped to his feet, thrusting out the revolver. "If I throw another slug into you, it just might hurt some more," he roared.

"I would rather die in pain than see your questions answered. I know well that curiosity is the worst torment to an Englishman."

"I'm not English," said Pink.

"It's all the same. I might as well have said 'human.' "

Pink recalled that he had the Colt, and so could take a few chances. "I'll trade you. One drop of brandy for each answer."

It considered. Then, without budging, it gave the effect of a shrug. "Why not? You'll be dead soon."

"You're so sure," said Pink.
"Look at your scanner."

There was something in the words that sent Pink racing. He was only just in time to see the finish of all his new-born hopes.

The *Cottabus* and *Diogenes* were approaching at a slowing pace; the *Elephant's Child* had deactivated her drive to wait for them. Whether the captains of the sister ships saw them or not, Pink could not tell; but a number of the space giants, so reduced in size as to be mere blots on the screen, hovered in the area.

As the ships gradually lost speed, a giant appeared atop each, growing rapidly from eight feet to a thousand, till they straddled the great ships like riders on Shetland ponies.

The thing on the floor chuckled. "We are much more comfortable at that size, you see, Captain. We don't like to cramp our molecular structure into these puny dimensions. We can get into bottles—but we prefer to expand as you see." Then it laughed. "Yes, there is one of us on your own flagship at this instant, where he has been waiting, compressed, till the others caught their seats. Your ships are

captured as surely as in a net. You cannot dislodge them, as you know. You must carry them to Earth so, or capitulate and let them inside."

There was no scrap of fear that he would carry these devils to Earth, naturally. But for the moment, Pink could see no sure way to escape the doom that now lay over him and all his men. They would have to remain in this asteroid belt . . . perhaps forever.

CHAPTER XV

THE three spaceships lay together in the void.

In the *Elephant's Child*, 57 men, seven officers, and Circe Smith were seated in the demolished recreation room, which was the only place besides the mess hall with enough chairs to accommodate them all. Radio communication with the other ships was handled over an extension set connected to the main radio room by a triple quancord laid down with furious energy by Sparks.

"What we need, and need fast, is this," said Pinkham. "A method by which we can project lead, in pellets or spray or any damn form, with accuracy, using our platinum guns. There aren't any other weapons that will fire from within."

"As you know, we've tried a few methods. One of the gunners of the *Cottabus* went into an air-lock and tossed a lead ball at the giant on the *Diogenes*, using a sling-gun. He found the range was too long; and when the captain attempted to bring the *Cottabus* nearer, the thing on *Diogenes* simply reared his ship up by shifting his weight backward. So long as they can maneuver our ships as easily as toy boats, we can't use that simple method.

"Then *Diogenes* tried to smash our giant off his perch by simply ramming him headlong. Take a look at the screen and you'll see that *Diogenes* has a dented nose for her pains. Five men died in that try."

"Captain," said a hydroponics engineer, "isn't it possible that, if we keep trying to oppose these aliens, they may simply tear their way into the ships and retaliate?"

"Quite possible. Their strength is equal to picking the *Elephant's Child* apart, I'm sure." He glared at the men. "Listen: I don't have to pull punches with you. The chances of our getting rid of these giants and making it to Earth are damned remote. There may be a chance, though, so we have to keep trying for it."

"The most important thing we have to do is keep this lifeform of the asteroids from going to Earth.

We of the armada are a terrible danger to mankind, through no fault of ours. We're so many Typhoid Marys, potential carriers of something worse than any disease. Even if we're all killed, the giants might manage to learn the control of the ships, and take them to Terra alone.

"So if we can't wipe out the enemy, our only course is to destroy ourselves and our ships. Every officer in the armada has instructions to blow up his ship if the giants should break into it. The thing is so important that I've issued orders to do that even though the use of lead-thrower weapons might conquer the invaders.

"If giants seize a ship and it is not destroyed within five minutes, the other two will turn their platinum guns on it.

"Any questions?"

Jackson, who was spokesman for the crew, answered promptly, "No questions, sir."

"Okay. Now let's have the technicians' report."

A lean, angular man rose. "I've checked all the books, Captain. There is no way to substitute a charge of lead for the war-head in the curium shells."

There was a stillness. "You mean we can't shoot lead at the giants except with the few handguns in my possession," said Pink

heavily.

"That's right, Captain."

"The giants are too alert to be caught that way," said Bill Calico. "I have an idea—not much of a one, but it's a try."

"Let's have it."

Jerry waved a hand. "Please remove O. O. Smith first."

Circe flared, "I think you're just afraid I'll get your job, you incompetent—"

"Take her out," said Pink to Joe Silver.

Calico then outlined his plan. Pinkham said at once, "I'll relay it to the other ships. We'll try it immediately." They all nodded agreement. Pink bent over the radio; he gave the co-captains instructions in an ancient language which they all knew, but which he felt sure would baffle any eavesdropping giants—an old, old tongue known as Pig Latin.

The officers and men scattered to their stations. Pink and Jerry took Circe to the captain's quarters, where Pink took his seat for the plan's direction, Jerry holding the Colt on Circe and the dying giant.

The space drives of the three ships were activated, and in side-by-side formation they moved slowly forward, as Pink watched keenly for a sign of objection from the gigantic "jockeys" atop them.

None so far . . . probably they thought Pink was under the instructions of their brother inside. Five minutes went by. Eight. Fifteen.

The largest asteroid in this part of the belt appeared ahead; it was roughly fourteen miles in diameter. The ships dipped their noses as if to pass well under it. They drew very close. Pink bent to his speaker and bellowed, "Now!"

As one, the auxiliary jets of each ship roared into life. *Cottabus* and *Diogenes* leaped out beside their flagship, and like three hot-shot pilots buzzing an airdrome, the captains took the enormous spacecraft hurtling for the surface of the asteroid. Passing beneath it—or, thought Pink irrelevantly, while every nerve and sinew concentrated on the dangerous task, perhaps they were flying over it upside down—they brought their years of training and experience to bear on the problem of missing that knobbed gray surface by the smallest margin possible. *Diogenes* actually scraped her superstructure, with a noise that made every hair on her captain's neck stand upright; the others missed the planetoid by no more than a foot or two. Then they were clear and again in the void.

According to orders, they slowed

at a distance of four hundred miles, and eagerly scanned one another in their viewscreens for signs of the giants.

Pink gave a loud shout of relief, and took a second to realize that his co-captains had each groaned . . .

The riders on *Cottabus* and *Diogenes* had vanished, and were undoubtedly back there by the asteroid, reconstituting their bashed-up bodies angrily. But Pink now heard, with a sinking heart, that his giant was still with him. It had leaned backward from the knees, lying flat on the hull which it had gripped with legs and arms. Somehow it had grasped Pink's plan in time to prepare itself. The asteroid had flattened its face and chest like a plane smoothing wood, and it was now forming itself anew, with, so they told Pink, a truly malicious scowl on its reformed lips.

Jerry was standing with a hand on Pink's shoulder; he had forgotten Circe in the tenseness of the bid for freedom. She came up on the other side and put her own hand on the captain's other shoulder. He was startled, and realizing that she could have killed or captured them both, had she wished, chalked up another doubt in his mind against the theory of her alienness.

"Please come outside," she said

urgently. "I want to suggest something to you."

He rose at once and followed her to the door, while Jerry frowned and the dying giant watched him out of faded red eyes. In the hall, she said, "You're almost licked, Captain. It's time for desperation measures." Pink laughed, but before he could ask her what the hell they *had* been trying, she hurried on. "Find out where the home of these monsters is; it must be an asteroid. Then go there. Land and get out with your guns. They will think our friend in there brought us to them—and you'll have the advantage of surprise. You have about a dozen firearms that will take lead bullets. That's enough for twelve of us. I think we'd stand a chance of success."

"And if they murder us all? What about the ship?"

She said, "Leave orders to blow it up if we fail."

Pink scratched his jaw. The girl had something, or the nucleus of something, there. He saw other possibilities in it—it was tantamount to suicide, but there was nothing else left to try. He said, "If we live through this, Circe, I'll see you make lieutenant!"

"I'd rather make . . . well, never mind." She turned to go into the room. He wondered if she had had Joe Silver in mind.

CHAPTER XVI

HE said to the alien, "Where's your home planetoid?"

"Why?" it asked, mockery still in its weak voice.

"I'm capitulating. I want to make a deal with your people."

It said, "Ah, the human has sense after all. Our home is the largest of the asteroids, as you call them. The one you said at supper last night had a diameter of 440 miles. We call it Oasis—and a poor one it is, when we remember Earth."

Jerry said, astounded, "*What?*" His narrow face worked with surprise.

"Shut up, Jerry." Pink still had things to find out. "Can you tell your race, telepathically, what we're doing? I don't want them to lose patience and tear up the hull. We have a very angry gent atop us."

"It's the girl," snarled Jerry, before the alien could answer. "She's got you fooled like a—like a—good Lord, Pink, are you so crazy about her you can't see she's been waiting to put this idea in your head all this time?"

"Jerry," he said through his teeth, "shut your damn mouth. I'm captain of the *Elephant's Child*."

Jerry was aiming the Colt at

him; accidentally, Pink hoped. Then the O. O. said, "If I have to blow out your guts to save us, Pink, I will." His tortured features writhed with pain. "Oh, hell, boy, wake up!"

"Give me one more minute, before you fly off the handle and make an ass of yourself—and a mess of me." Pink had to have that minute. It was so vital he couldn't save himself from the angered Jerry with the one phrase that would explain everything.

"Jerry, one lousy minute."

"Just tell me you don't mean it about giving in."

He couldn't. My God, he couldn't. There was too much of a chance that this brute on the floor was telepathic with its own kind. "I have to do it, Jerry," he said.

"Then I have to tie you up till you're sane," said Jerry. "First, though, I've got to make sure about this girl." The muzzle of the gun traveled toward Circe, steadily, remorselessly.

Pink had no alternative; the lives of all his men hung in that teetering balance. He jerked his right hand, and the tiny gambler's gun, the antique Derringer he had hidden up his sleeve for emergencies, slid down into his palm. Instinctively his forefinger caught the trigger and with sorrow and determination he shot Jerry high

in the chest, below the clavicle and a safe distance from the lung. Jerry staggered back, a look of amazement spreading over his face; he fired the Colt wildly, putting a slug into the floor. Then he sat down, making hurt, uncomprehending noises. Circe took the gun from his hand.

Pink heard a babble from the intercom. He grasped that some of his officers must have seen the occurrence. He still hadn't much more than a minute.

"Circe," he snapped, "turn off that intercom and then lock the door." To the giant he said, "Well, can you tell your friends?"

"I would have doubted you, had you not eliminated your objecting officer," it told him. "Now I will say that I cannot communicate with my race through thought transference; but if you head for Oasis, you will be safe."

Pink breathed a little easier. He snatched down a bottle of whisky and twisted off the cap. There was another fact he must learn. He knelt and presented the bottle to the inert lips. "Have a slug," he said.

"You are sensible," said the being with satisfaction. "Pour it into my mouth or my eye; I can absorb it through any orifice." Pink poured rapidly. The liquor ran down over the yellow hide.

"No, no," gurgled the monster.
"Slowly! I absorb it far more
slowly than you do—"

PINK stood up. He took a drink from the bottle and handed it to Circe. His face was radiant with success. "Toast the last slim chance, honey," he said, voice cracking with relief. "We just found out what we needed to know." He retrieved the bottle after she had downed a gulp, gave it to the dazed Jerry. "Cheer up, boy," he said. "You didn't get your pink skin plugged for nothing. Now listen." Rapidly he outlined Circe's plot, then the additions he had concocted. "See why I had to do it?" he asked finally.

"Yeah. Yes, I see." Jerry blinked. "Would you spray a little sulfafaheal on this hole, Pink? It hurts . . . Okay, I give in. I'm with you. It's a mad notion, but I sure can't better it. I'm with you." He looked at Circe, who was already busy with sulfaspay and bandages. "But can we trust this wench, Captain? She could be a wonderful decoy for 'em."

"She's in the clear, Jerry; if we hadn't been so blasted rattled we'd have realized it long ago. There was a test she could have passed in two seconds that would have eliminated all this fat-headed suspicion."

"What?"

"Holy Holmendis, boy—lead! If she were alien, the touch of lead would have crisped her up with pain and paralysis." Pink opened the door then, and the first tide of officers coming to Jerry's rescue were halted at sight of Circe tending his wound. Pink said to Jerry, and to them all, "While I was standing in the hall, I took a cartridge out of this Derringer, and rubbed the lead across the back of her neck. She never winced. That vouches for her, doesn't it?"

Jerry said, "It does. Heaven forgive us for a pack of drooling imbeciles! It does indeed."

Circe stood up. She came to Pink and stared him in the face. "So that was it," she said quietly. "You were testing me. And I thought it was a caress. Oh, you—" Then she hauled off and smacked Captain John Pinkham square in the left eye.

It hurt like sin, but Pink could hardly blame her. So he apologized, without words. He took her in his arms and kissed her soundly.

And Circe kissed him back.

CHAPTER XVII

THE *Elephant's Child* rested on the surface of the asteroid Oasis, a waterless, airless, cold and gray ball as uninviting as any solid

body in the universe. At the entrance to Air-lock One, the officers stood in a tight group listening to Pinkham; their spacesuits were fastened on, only the helmets remaining to be donned; their gloves were the modified digitmits which enabled the wearers to hold small objects and to operate machinery or firearms.

There were seven officers, and now three crewmen in spacesuits joined them. Jerry, whose wound was nearly healed already, thanks to the sulfaspay, passed out guns from the captain's collection. Each man carried a handgun, or, in two cases a long rifle. The ammunition for all amounted to one thousand and two hundred and five rounds, in the main handgun cartridges. Pink had decided against using the Kentucky rifle, which was difficult for a modern man to load.

At each belt hung half a dozen curious objects, shaped like bottles but of a dull gray color and rough surface texture. These sloshed and gurgled when the men moved.

Pink concluded his instructions on the use of the weapons and the gray bottle-things. "Remember," he said, "keep in touch by your radio, and don't travel more than a mile from the ship if you can help it. Try the lure first, then when the containers are full, the guns.

Be sure to keep at least one portion of lure for emergency; don't use it all." He grinned. "And don't drink any of the lure."

The men laughed, easing tension. Pink went on. "You'll have some trouble adjusting to the gravity—our average weight will be six or seven pounds, or, in Jerry's case, three or four." They chuckled again. "Remember we don't know how they'll react, so keep your minds open and use your own judgment in everything. Now let's go."

As he turned and activated the sliding panel that covered the first chamber of the air-lock, and they all settled their helmets down onto their shoulders and fastened them, an eleventh figure joined them, its helmet already in place. Jerry, shaking his head reprovingly, handed this one the last weapon, a small automatic from the so-called "Gangster Age" of America. Then they went into the air-lock and the door shut tight behind them.

In the control room, Jackson and a few others watched tensely on the viewscreen as one by one the landing party jumped to the planetoid. He looked at his watch. "Two hours," he said. "Oh my God, I hope they make it!" For in precisely two hours, if they had not returned to the ship, Jackson was to blow it to metallic dust,

and all the remaining humans with it.

Forty miles above the surface of the small world, the *Diogenes* and the *Cottabus* cruised at a good rate of speed, to keep their hulls free of hitchhiking giants while watching the progress of the expedition.

On the floor of Pinkham's quarters, the dying alien lay alone and cursed weakly at the sly and crafty doublecross he had so stupidly fallen for. He called upon a number of strange gods to curse these mortals; among the names he uttered was that of a deity called Allah.

In dressing room B, a technician discovered a crewman who was sitting against a wall rubbing his skull. "Somebody bopped me," said the man glumly. "I'm supposed to go out there and blast giants, dammit. Who could have swiped me so hard?"

PINK took an experimental hop. It should have carried him, at Terra gravity, about two feet. He soared over a hillock and came down gently on a plain of rock that looked like lava; his hop had carried him some scores of yards. He felt for an instant like a kid let loose on a wonderful playground. Then he snapped into it and began to scan the terrain for signs of life.

To the right was the mountain they had seen from the descending ship, with its irregular rows of gaping holes which suggested caves and therefore possible habitations. It wouldn't take more than five minutes to reach them at an easy amble, or a minute at a brisk walk; about a mile away, they seemed.

Then with a horrified start he remembered the giant who had been atop his ship. Washington Daley had been delegated to deal with it—and Pink had forgotton, had not even glanced back to see how his lieutenant was making out! He whirled neglecting caution, and fell on his face. Luckily he came down like a big bulky feather, and caught himself and bounced up again, a rubber ball of a man on this alien world Oasis.

He was just in time to see the giant, bending forward over the front of the ship, begin to blur and stream downward toward the tiny figure of the human who stood below him. In a moment he resembled a cloud of tobacco-smoke, drawn into the gray container in Daley's hand. He vanished entirely, Daley clapped on the sealing lid, and gave a triumphant wave to his captain. Pink blew out a breath of gratitude and remorse; he'd have to be on his toes from now on, really vibrant with watchfulness. Laxity in one thing could lose this weird

battle.

Strung out in a straggling line of erratically progressing units, the men of Earth headed for the caves. In a time so short as to be faintly ridiculous, they were moving up the mountainside. The gaping holes *were* caves, and obviously deep ones. Pink stood at the entrance of one for a moment, checking on the number of his men; then he waved a hand over his head, and entered the great den. Behind him came another figure, one whose slimness told him it was probably Jerry.

Their chest lamps lit up the interior, which was as gray, knobby, and featureless as the outside world. Pink held his Colt .44 in his right hand, one of the bottles in his left. The technicians of the *Elephant's Child* had worked like drudges over those bottles . . .

Every bottle of liquor aboard had been requisitioned. The liquid had been poured into plastic containers; only a few spoonfuls had been left in each bottle.

Then lead, melted down and beaten into sheets, was wrapped around each bottle, forming a thin and chinkless layer over all the glass but the lip; and the lead was painted with tough plastikoid paint, which covered it with a film one-twentieth of an inch thick. Caps of lead were made for the bottles. At

the end of a couple of hours, they had sixty-six bottles, glass inside, lead covered, and topped off with plastikoid which would conceal the presence of lead from any known test short of X-ray.

Each of the eleven men carried six of these bottles, then, actually lead containers, but apparently plastikoid; the lead stoppers were concealed in joerg-hide bags. If the giant who had been beaten in the spaceship was a criterion, the enemy would not recognize the presence of lead until it actually touched them—and then, thought Pink, with a quick prayer, it would be too late for them.

Beaming the radio to a distance of ten feet, he said, "Hey, Jerry, want to lay a bet on who bags the first brute?"

"Sure. Twenty bucks says I get him. And don't call me Jerry," said the sweet, quiet, and thoroughly startling voice of organicus officer Circe Smith.

CHAPTER XVIII

I DIDN'T have to do it, Pink thought. I could have changed the orders when I saw that no giants were in sight. We could have blasted the one on top of the *Elephant's Child* and taken off and got out of range of 'em and gone back to Earth. We were free

in that instant, when Daley caught the alien and corked it up in the lead bottle with the liquor that drew it. We shouldn't have come out here to the caves. We should have left Oasis to itself.

He knew that he had squelched this idea before it was born, because he had longed for a good fight; he recognized this alien life-form as unclean, and he'd wanted to stamp it out, or make a dent in its numbers anyway. So he'd gone ahead with the project, and now here was Circe, risking her life to be with him, and if anything happened to her he'd kill himself . . . well, at least he'd mop up the giants who'd drawn him here, he'd make a pogrom, a massacre to avenge her . . .

She isn't dead, boy, he told himself. She's just in danger. Don't get distracted.

"Stick close," he told her shortly. "I'll whale the pants off you when we get back for this trick, but for now, stay close and keep your eyes open."

Then he tuned his radio outward. "Report," he said. His men checked in. Nothing had been sighted thus far.

So it was Captain Pinkham's luck to meet the first alien.

Rounding a turn, he saw that the cavern enlarged, became a huge grotto; seated around its walls,

staring at one another in the uncanny silence of this airless place, were many of the giant life-forms. Only one was near him, and this monster was first to see him; it leaped at him with the abruptness of perfect muscular control, its feet a little off the floor of the cavern—Pink recalled that these things could levitate themselves in space.

There was no time to use the lure of the bottle. He threw up his old revolver and fired point-blank, catching Circe by the arm and hurling her to one side as he did so. The giant recoiled as at a wall, doubled and thrashed in agony. Pink, rooted to the spot, waited to see the effects. Would one slug of lead be enough? And evidently it was, for suddenly the thing fell and writhed futilely on the ground, flinging its arms wide with diminishing strength. In a moment it was helpless, its only motion a slight heaving as its life retreated far within the gigantic bulk. Its red eyes glowed at him malevolently in the glare of his chest-lamp.

Strangely enough, none of the others had seen him yet, nor had any of them moved from the sitting posture. Swiftly he unhooked four of his six bottles and set them in a row on the rock floor. Circe returned, having bounced like a

bit of india-rubber a dozen yards before checking herself. "You big bully," she said over the radio, and, her tuning being for distance, Daley in another cave said "What? Who?" in a startled tone.

Pink dragged her, five pounds of resistance on the tiny planet, and plunked her down behind a rock. "Sit tight," he said urgently. "Keep the gun handy. And check that you haven't spilled any alky—we'll need all the bottles we can get." Then he turned and shone his beam full on the traps he had set out. One of the aliens was bound to spot them soon.

When one did, it came at them with a rush, snarling soundlessly as it sought the source of the illumination. Towering over the insignificant bottles, it halted, shuddered, stared down—Pink held his breath—and the incredible disintegration and flow of the body happened. The giant entered the bottle, leaving not a trace of its thousand-foot carcass outside. Restraining a desire to leap out and cork up that bottle, Pink waited. The movement of this alien had caught the red eyes of others; they advanced, some hurrying and some cautious, till two more had scented or sensed the alcohol and poured into bottles. Pink kept his eyes on the little containers. Beside him, Circe gazed with horrified fascina-

tion at the coming gargantuas . . .

A TRIO of them were misting now; this was the test. One empty bottle remained. What would happen, Pink wondered; was one giant per bottle the maximum content? The three streaked down, like smoke sucked into a vacuum cleaner. They jetted into the bottles, and again nothing was left outside. Pink said "Good," in a mutter, and forced himself to wait longer. The more the merrier. How long would it take them to soak up the alcohol? His captive had said the process was slow. How slow? How long did he dare wait?

He caught eight more, then the next hesitated, looking around for the source of light. Either he was capable of more resistance to the seductive element, or the bottles were now full of churning, lapping aliens. There were more of them approaching, but he didn't dare wait any longer. He jumped forward, potting at the foremost.

It went down thrashing, and he shot over it into the yellow of them. Emptying the Colt, he reloaded hastily and plugged or nicked another half dozen. By then he was standing over the bottles. Nothing had emerged yet. He stooped to slam on the caps.

With horrible speed two giants pounced for him; he saw them out

of the corner of his eye. Then they slammed full length to the rock, and he knew that Circe's automatic was in action. He corked the last bottle and slung it on his belt, put down the two remaining containers. Then he turned and made a mighty jump away from them, dragging Circe with him. The aliens came on.

Some of them could withstand the pull of the liquor, and some could not. There was a phalanx of them coming, for a good third of the growth's population had seen the disturbance by now. Any who appeared to be passing by the bottles, he and Circe shot; those who hesitated by them and were drawn in exchanged their liberty for their lives, because in two minutes Pinkham had feverishly capped them into the leaden prisons. He hooked them onto his belt and said into the mouthpiece before his lips, "Go for the entrance, baby. I'll cover you."

"No!" she snapped back. "You are not going to sacrifice—"

"Sacrifice, nuts!" he yelled. "This is part of the plan you'd have heard if you hadn't sneaked into the landing party at the last minute. Get going!" He was re-loading as he spoke.

She ran, almost flying down the cave-tunnel with great leaps that

covered many yards each. He fired three times at the giants who now loomed above him; then he was running too, stretching his legs and throwing every ounce of power and panic in his frame into the incredible jumps. And apparently he had the advantage over the brutes, for he began to outdistance them; their mass being greater, he was helped by the lack of gravity.

Then a rock crumbled under his toe, he was thrown off balance, his momentum shot him full tilt against the wall of the passage, and his head cracked sharply against the inside of his helmet. He knew that he was losing consciousness, and that he had fallen and was rolling straight into the path of the raging aliens.

CHAPTER XIX

THOUGHT came to him before feeling. Pink lay in a hazy world of shifting ideas, of coagulating and disintegrating forms of cerebration. He was not wholly unaware of what had happened, but his groping mind was more concerned with piecing together certain facts and fancies, reaching conclusions he felt were of the first importance. If his body were in danger, it must help itself, for Pink had other fish to fry.

As he sank into thick-witted

stupor, then fought up to the light of reason, feeling his mind ebb and flow with ideas and mad conjectures, it came to him that he knew the truth of the giants, and had not stated it to himself before in so many words. He had deliberately shied away from it, in fact, for it stank of fantasy, of crack-brained superstition and imbecilic fairy tales . . .

Admit it, he told himself, giggling in the far reaches of his brain. Admit it. You know about these critters, Pink.

Yes. I know about them. They are the djinn.

The djinn that Solomon ruled, conquered, and put down. The enormous entities of Arabian Nights tales, whose habits and character and shrewd-canny-gullible ways of thinking were all set down in the books and marveled at by people even yet, hundreds and hundreds of years after they had been written. Marveled, sure, but marveled only at the imaginations that had produced them. And it wasn't imagination at all. It was the real actual goddam solid thing.

The djinn had been at once a triumph and a sad mistake of nature. They were the ultimate in physical perfection, needing nothing, living perfectly independently, huge and strong and yet able to

assume the tiniest proportions when needed. Wounds were nothing, for their makeup was such that their molecules compressed away from weapons, to ooze back into place when danger was past. They controlled the forces of the atom, at least to the extent of ability to freeze protons, and probably they could do many more stunts in that line.

All their powers, being far in advance of man's, had been misunderstood and misinterpreted in the old days. So when a djinni let his atoms flow into the most convenient shape for getting into bottles for alcohol or for passing an obstruction he didn't care to demolish, it seemed to men that he turned into a cloud of smoke. Hadn't Pink used that simile to himself?

The fact that they could levitate, probably by control of the force of gravity, and fly through the thin upper air, by some process Pink only dimly understood, was certainly enough to stamp them as minor gods in Arabia and all the other countries they had infested.

Sure, they were a triumph of nature; but also a colossal failure. For they were, despite their scientific powers, too stupid for pity, too insensitive for compassion, and too egocentric for tolerance. Their nature was that of the most depraved human being. Consequently

they'd been beaten. In spite of their terrific strength, they'd been beaten by puny, unscientific, bumbling man.

How?

Well, Solomon had known about the lead. He'd sealed them in copper bottles with stoppers of lead, and Pink would bet a buck those bottles had been lead-lined, too. Solomon hadn't gone far enough, of course; he'd thrown the bottles into the sea, and sometimes they'd washed up and been opened. For bait, he must have used alcohol, too, since it was the Achilles heel of the djinn.

Had he nailed the entire breed of djinn in his lifetime? It seemed likely, for the legends stopped soon afterwards, didn't they? Pink wasn't sure. Anyway, there sure as hell weren't any djinn on Earth today.

How had they gotten out here, all the way to Star System Ninety? That was beyond conjecture. How come the first brute he had contacted, old Ynohp the phony Martian, spoke a kind of messed-up Shakespearian lingo? God only knew.

Now he'd discovered them, anyway, and they wanted to go back to Earth. If they got hold of the *Elephant's Child*, they might do it. He couldn't let them succeed . . . but then the crew was going to

blow up the ship in two hours.
Two hours!

Pinkham's mind beat wildly at the prison of lethargy and dimmed consciousness. How long had he lain here? Where was he lying? Did the giants, the djinn, have him? And Circe?

Circe. Making the most intense and painful effort of his life, Pink dragged his eyes open and tried to sit up. He had to find Circe.

He saw nothing, and there was a weight on him that held him flat on his back. Either his lamp was broken, or he was blind.

Sensibly, though it cost him untold hell to be sensible, Pink lay quietly until he felt all his faculties under control. Then he made an abrupt and violent attempt to sit up. Whatever it was that was holding him down rolled off. He managed to get to his knees, one hand on the rock beneath him, and then arms were thrown around him and a body pressed against his.

The horror of absolute blackness and the unknown predicament he was in proved just a little too much for him. Captain Pinkham gave a loud, long scream of fear.

CHAPTER XX

"WHAT is it?" asked Circe, her voice wild with fright.
"Pink, darling, what is it? Are

you hurt?"

It was Circe who was holding him. Sobbing with relief, he said into the radio, "No, no, baby, I'm fine, I'm wonderful."

Her answering cry was a tiny sound of joy and affection. "I wish I could kiss you," she said, "but there are two spacesuits in the way."

He found her hand and squeezed it hard. "I wish I could see you, Smitty," he said, "but either I'm blind or—"

"Oh, I should have told you at once. I turned off our chest-lamps."

"But where are we?"

"Not far from where you fell." Her hand was a comfort in his, as much so as a squad of Space Marines marching down to greet them would have been. "You flew past me like a kicked football, Pink, and I veered off to see if you were okay. When you fell and didn't move, the first thing I did was snap off the lamps. About a second afterwards, the giants went past. They have a weird kind of glow in the dark. I think they could have seen us—certainly they don't exist blind in this ink-pool—but there's a ridge of rock and we were pretty well hidden behind it. I dragged you about forty feet and found this hole and we've been lying here ever since."

"The others," he said, remembering.

"I've been in touch with Daley all the time. He and Calico ran into a lot of trouble and Calico got a broken leg. Joe Silver took him back to the ship. Daley and Jerry found each other and fought off a horde of giants. Every man got all his bottles full of 'specimens' and then used up most of his lead. Sparks—" she hesitated a moment—"Sparks is dead. So is Randy Kinkare."

Pink said quietly into the dark, "I don't think Randy would mind that. He didn't have much of a face left."

"Whatever that first one did to burn him, that's the weapon they used on him and Sparks. Both of them were burnt to a . . ."

"Okay," he said. "Okay, okay."

"So Daley said they'd try to find us; but everyone got mixed up in the caves, and there hasn't been a sign or sound of anyone for half an hour."

"Half an hour?" The flesh chilled down his back. "How long have I been out?"

"I don't know. A couple of hours."

"My Lord! The *Elephant's Child* is to be blown up two hours from the minute we left her!"

"Daley said Silver was going to countermand that order."

Pink groaned heavily. "He can't! Jackson had my absolute command on it, and Jackson would see himself and Silver and the whole lot of them dead before he'd fail to carry out a command of mine. That was important; we calculated that two hours was more than enough to expend all the ammo, and that if we weren't back by then, the hull would be crawling with giants. Every bullet aboard came out with us. We could n't take the chance of the ship blasting off with giants on her, maybe in the form of gnats or smoke or—no," he finished, "Silver, if he tried to change my order, is either dead or unconscious or in the brig right now." He lifted his left hand. "I've got to check the time," he said, and for an instant switched on the dial of his glove watch.

It was a hundred and two minutes after landing time.

He had eighteen minutes to get back to the *Elephant's Child*.

CHAPTER XXI

HE beamed his radio to its fullest extent. "Daley," he said. "Daley, come in. Jerry. Cohan. Caleskie. Kole. Come in, anyone."

"Kole here, Captain. I'm on the plain. It was all fouled up in that cave."

"What can you see?"

"They've got the big trap out of the ship," said the distant, tinny voice of the crewman. "What a waste of good liquor! Beg your pardon, Captain."

"Giants?" Pink asked.

"About a million of 'em, all headed for the trap. We should have tried it first. Did you know Caleskie got his?"

"No, I didn't know. We had to suck them out into the open before they could spot the trap, Kole. Is Lieutenant Daley in sight?"

"I saw him a while back, sir. He was headed out of a cave with the O. O. But it turned out they were going the wrong way, because I —"

"Thanks, Kole. Report aboard ship. Don't get mixed up with the giants."

"They won't bother me, sir. It's like a bunch of big bees tearing after a vat of nectar out here. They don't even see me."

"What did he mean?" asked Circe. "A trap?"

"Plastikoided lead box, twelve by twelve feet. All the alcohol in the ship was poured into it an hour after we left, and they set it outside as far from the ship as they could safely go. I didn't know it would work, but it was a try. It still doesn't affect Jackson's orders. I didn't know, I still don't know, but

that some of the djinn can resist the stuff."

"The *what?*?" she asked, startled.

"Never mind. We've got about a quarter hour to get back. Where in blazes is Daley?"

A small, weakened voice said in his ear, "I'm here, Pink. Jerry too. But he's out cold. I don't feel so hot myself."

"Daley!" he roared. "Where are you?"

"Big cave, about size of Texas. Came across it trying to find our way out. Lot of giants here. One of them saw us and picked us up and banged us together. I think he must be saving us for a hearty lynch. He's sitting ten feet off watching us."

"Your guns, boy!"

"No good. All the slugs are gone. Pink," said the weak, worried voice, "do you know what time it is? You better hightail it for the ship."

"I'm coming after you," said Pink.

"Don't be a heroic son of a space cook, Pink!"

"Shut up and lie still." He switched his radio to close quarters. "Honey, you make for the *Child*. I'll pick up the boys and be right with you."

"You're crazy," she said flatly. "I wouldn't leave you if—"

He had switched on his chest lamp and drawn out a pen and paper from his pocket kit. "I'm going to write Jackson a note countermanding the order. Take it to him."

"You're wasting your time," she said grimly. "If you're going into the cave, I'm going too."

"You fathead, you can save the ship by taking this note."

"You're doing it to save me. I won't. What happens to you happens to me."

"My God the whole damn ship —"

"Doesn't matter to me if you're gone, Pink." Her voice was strange, half-hysterical and oddly loving. "I don't know why I feel this way about you, Pink. I've never been in love before. If I hadn't been stranded, I'd be old enough to be your mother. You're a big cold dedicated spaceman, but I love you. Lead the way, if you're going to make a fool of yourself."

IN that moment Pink learned wisdom, for he gave up his attempt at a note and bounded to his feet. Some well-spring of instinct had told him that a man could never argue a woman out of anything.

"Got your automatic?"

"And a full clip left."

"Come on, baby."

They ran down the cavernous corridor, grotesque, tiny fleas making unbelievable leaps. In seconds they had entered the grotto.

Many, too many giants were still there. Some of them seemed not to have seen anything of the hectic occurrences, others were standing in small groups (if anything formed of thousand-foot beings could be called small, thought Pink as he rocketed along) motioning hugely to one another.

"Stay close," he called to Circe. She was moving as fast as he, her light frame an asset. They ran down one side of the cavern, ignoring giants who did not at first notice them. Pink beamed out his radio and said, "Daley! Locate yourself. I'm in the cavern."

"You ape," said Daley, "why'd you come? We're in front of an entrance that's the middle one of three. Spot it?"

"I see four sets of three," said Pink, heading for the nearest as his heart sank.

"Sorry; I can't see any more than these. Be careful, old boy." There was a pause. "We have twelve minutes left," said the senior lieutenant calmly.

The first of the triple entrances—had they been built, or were they natural?—was at hand. Three gigantic djinn sat near them. The ground, uneven as a lava flow solid-

ified, might have concealed a score of humans. Pink gave a high leap, surveyed the terrain as he floated down. Nobody here. But a giant saw him.

Pink shot him in the ankle and dived like a skin-swimmer between his legs. He had lost Circe. He pivoted, wide-eyed, and saw her beneath the skyscraper torso of a bending giant. Their lamps were drawing attention now. He saw her shoot the titan and fly off at a tangent, disappearing behind others of the enemy.

Sixth sense warning prickled his neck. He whirled again to pot at a groping hand the size of a ten-story house; the hand contracted, bunched, groped outward and was hidden as the body fell upon it. Pink saved himself by a frantic backward shove that jolted him into the wall. Circe sped by and he followed, shouting into his radio. They joined hands and aimed for the next entrances, a mile down the hall.

Four speeding djinn abruptly barred their path, express-flying down on them.

CHAPTER XXII

"**I** KNOW how a fly feels," gasped the girl. "I'll never wield another swatter."

Pink had empied his Colt. He

tried reloading on the run, or rather, he thought wryly, on the bounce, but it was a tricky job. And he had only about a dozen shells left.

Circe shot another angry monster. If lead took just two seconds longer to work on those immense systems, Pink realized, he and Circe would have been squashed long since. They had fought down half the hall, past three of the triple entrances, and now there was only one to check on. If Daley and Jerry weren't there, they might as well give up; the ship would go scattering into the void in about five minutes.

They had to watch backwards as well as before them. The giants were nearly all in motion now, the milling of such throngs of them having caught the vacant stares of those who had been gaping at nothing.

And suddenly there was Daley, standing before them and holding the limp spacesuited form of Jerry Jones in his arms. "Hey, Pink," he said, "down here."

Pinkham blasted two foemen in the hands as they grasped for him. "Like fighting giant redwoods," said Circe indistinctly, panting. They joined the two officers, jumping and digging in their heels to halt sharply.

"We have to make for that,"

said Pink, waving across the grotto at the invisible hole which led to the plain. Straight through these dam Alps of aliens." He shot over Circe's head. "How you feeling?"

"Little rocky," said Daley.

"Take the Colt, then." He shoved it into the lieutenant's hand hoisted Jerry like a rag out of Daley's arms. "Come on," he barked. "And don't get slapped. That's an order." He ran.

Their combined chest-lamps beamed out a couple of miles as they headed for the home stretch. Across the light passed the giant djinn, moving to waylay them, standing mountain-steady to intercept. Circe rocketed into the lead and led them on a zigzag course that avoided the vast parodies of human feet which barred the way like river dams.

They had had uncanny luck thus far. Why? Probably the giants were sluggish from long inactivity. Too, Pink knew, it's hard to hit a small darting object that's not more than one-one-hundred-and-sixty-sixth of your size. And the lead slugs of their guns had turned many sure captures into escapes.

But now the guns were empty.

Feet, said Pink, quoting an ancient joke, feet, do your stuff!

Circe was amazing, dodging and pirouetting and even hurdling the gross feet when they couldn't be

side-stepped. Pink gamely followed her lead, Jerry now slung over his shoulder. There was panting in his ears—Daley must be having tough going. Then he recognized the deep wheezing breaths: they were his own.

"Daley?" he gasped.

"Right behind you, Pink."

The mouth of their corridor was in sight. Then there were djinn, a row of them standing side by side with feet firmly planted to make a barrier. My God, he thought, this is it! Circe vanished, he did not see where. The feet were there, and arms reaching down for him. He pitched sideways, flipped by a questing finger; crashed on his shoulder, rolled, still miraculously hanging onto Jerry. The brashest course was the only one. He gathered himself and jumped onto a toe. It was as hard as the rock. And this thing, he said irrelevantly in his mind, this massive piece of solidity can vaporize into a gin bottle! He slid down the toe and scuttled ratlike under the lofty legs and was in the clear. The tunnel, itself an astoundingly high cave, appeared directly before him.

There was no time now to look for Circe and Daley, vital though their safety was to him. He carried Jerry into the tunnel and loped with multiyarded strides for

the plain. He could not see any lamp-glare but his own. But he could not stop. Humanity in that instant overcame all his private desires. There were fifty-eight souls who would be blotted out if he didn't make the *Elephant's Child* in two minutes. Sixty-one, if you counted Daley and Circe and Pink himself. In less than one of those minutes he had traversed the tunnel and come out above the plain.

The ship was still there. Some distance away from it stood the big trap, and even yet giants were speeding toward it from all points of the compass. Pink gasped a breath and launched himself out and down the steep hillside. He took it all in that one jump. As he was landing, a curiously weightless man on this tiny planetoid, Jerry came to life and writhed suddenly in his arms, upsetting his balance. Pink fell and his left ankle shrieked with pain as it turned under him and was smashed into the gray rock by his dropping body and Jerry's.

He sprawled full length and knew his ankle was broken or sprained. Jerry rolled free and collapsed, sighing into his radio. Pink tried to stand and the ankle buckled. Horrified, he looked at his glove watch.

He had seventy seconds.

CHAPTER XXIII

PINK bellowed, "Jerry!" He yelled it so loudly that his ears protested at the helmet echoes. Jerry said groggily, "Wha?"

"Stand up!"

Jerry sat up and at once fell flat again. "Judas priest, I can't. That you Pink?"

"We've got to make the ship," he bawled, twisting with pain.

"Make it what?"

"If you want to live, son—stand up!"

Jerry got to his knees. "I'm sick, Pink."

He had used up six seconds. He had to try it on his own. Jerry was too far gone to function properly.

Pink stood up. His teeth were grinding together like millstones, but he didn't stop. He knew pain and dread and rage that shook him. He faced the ship, and stood on his good leg and bent his knee and gave a tremendous hop.

As he fell on his face, an unknown number of yards nearer, a great alien passed him, the mighty sole slamming the rock a few feet from his prone body. Pink struggled upright and balanced on the right leg and made another hop. This time he didn't fall when he lit. Praying thankfully for the

two seconds that saved, he sprang again. And fell, painfully.

It was a useless piece of bravado. It was impossible to reach the ship. He got up and leaped. He fell. He forced himself up and sprang and didn't fall and sprang and fell.

He couldn't waste a blink of time in looking at the watch or yelling with agony or even praying now. He went through his routine automatically, his mind a thing of terror. Eons seemed to pass him by as he hopped over the djinn-infested gray rock plain.

A superb spring took him abreast of the big lead vat. What wild scenes of delirium were going on there he could not even imagine. He hopped twice more and was at the ship.

At any instant, at this very second the ship would blossom into red-white carnage of metal and flesh and death. Impossibly Pink stood on his good leg and aimed for the scanner-port which he knew, or hoped, connected with the screen in the control room where Jackson sat.

Now the *Elephant's Child* was done, Jackson was shoving the switch over, now it would all disintegrate in his face. He flew through space and struck the hull flat; all the perishing strength in

him glued his body, his fingers in their thin gloves, to that curving surface. His great helmet, with the crest insignia of comets and spears that marked him as the captain, hung for a short time directly in front of the scanner-port.

He shook his head violently, back and forth, back and forth. *No*, he screamed in his mind, wishing insanely that his radio were constructed so that it could be heard in the ship. *No*, he shook, *no, no!*

Then his precarious grip on the smooth side slid off, and Captain Pinkham fell lightly but finally to the asteroid.

He lay there unresisting. He had done his best, absolutely his damned best. Let it blow. Let it blow.

After a while he looked at his glove watch. It was two minutes past the time for explosion.

He had saved the *Elephant's Child*.

He turned and looked across the plain and saw, beyond the great trap into which giant-smoke was settling, two figures come running toward him with unearthly strides. One of them halted and gathered Jerry into its arms. The other reached Pink and knelt beside him and hugged him tightly. Pink laughed, a passionate sound of relief. Circe said, "You made it,

darling. You made it!"

The air-lock began to open.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE djinni on the floor said, "I concede this battle to you, Captain. I have seen the ending on the screen. But there are others out there, on Oasis and in the void. We'll win to Earth some day in spite of this victory."

Pink, snugly ensconed in a foam-chair with his sprained ankle propped up, his surviving officers seated around him, and Circe on the arm of the deep chair, took another drink of lemonade. He made a face, almost asked for brandy, and remembered. He said, "Maybe the same way you came to these asteroids?"

"No, not that. That way went only in one direction, through the fourth dimension, I think. The people of the continent you call Atlantis built that way for our use, though much against our desire; and the machine they made was so fearful that its use sank their whole land into the sea. They were a great, scientific people, and we have not their skill."

"Atlantis too," Jerry said. "Now we've heard everything, all but the Little People and Pan."

The djinni did not seem to hear

him. Its eyes, like dead coals now in the yellow face, rested on Pink. "It was clever of you to recognize us from history."

"You go into bottles, speak Arabic, fly and are humanoid in form. I should have guessed your race hours before."

"We are not humanoid. You are djinnoid. We came before you in evolution."

"How do you know?" asked Da-
ley.

"Our legends . . . I cannot tell, being no more than six or seven thousand years old myself. But we are told we predate man."

"When were you relegated to this belt?" asked Jerry, who was still a little pale. "You were around in Solomon's time."

"Yes. He caught and trapped most of my race—we are not so numerous as you cursed rabbits—by the same means you used. One great vat he collected, after some years of the bottles, and sealed up a multitude of my folk and cast them off a ship; somehow the currents dragged the box to Atlantis. There my people were freed, and set about to conquer the land. But the Atlanteans captured them after several decades and, having constructed the terrible machine, sent them off to this forsaken hole in space. The cataclysm the ma-

chine made—evidently they hadn't been so clever as they thought, may Allah rot their souls!—set off volcanic action, which eventually sank their country. It was never very large, anyway . . ."

"How do you know this?" asked Pink. He was a bit breathless; at any moment the being might decide to shut up and die. He had to satisfy his curiosity about the space-dwellers.

"I was one who escaped Solomon. I made my way to England after a few centuries of wandering, of being a minor deity here and there, and in England in the late seventeenth century I met a brother. He had been on Atlantis, and hovering above it had seen the exiling of our race and the death of the land. Together we determined to find the machine, repair it if need be, and bring back our people. We thought they were somewhere in the bowels of the earth, or perhaps held invisible in the machine itself.

"We felt we were the last djinn at liberty. We went under the sea—"

"How?" This was Bill Calico, nursing a broken leg on the couch.

"We are oblivious to our surrounding elements, so long as they are not too dense for us to penetrate. After a year or two we

found the machine. It was partially destroyed, but so simple that we easily repaired it. We could not see how it could make our race vanish, but as we are indestructible except by lead, and the Atlanteans did not know of that metal, we knew that they had vanished rather than died. When we had the machine fixed, I volunteered to try it out and see what happened. He was to reverse it and draw me back shortly."

THE monstrous thing sighed. "It was too complex for us. First I found myself floating a mile or so off Oasis, and then my friend joined me. His adjustments had failed. The cursed machine had relegated us both."

"God bless Atlantis," murmured Circe.

"I presume you are taking the bottles and the great vat of lead back to Earth?" it queried slyly.

"Not on your life," said Daley. "As soon as we're out of System Ninety, we'll drop 'em into the void. Your damn tribe will be marooned properly this time."

"But they are alive in those prisons!" it shouted, its eyes momentarily reddening again. "Such compression is most irksome to them, and they must constantly shift about to keep clear of the

lead in the stoppers. It's inhuman!"

"You're right," said Pink grimly. "It's djinnlike."

"How did you learn English?" asked Jerry suddenly. "Modern English, I mean."

"You forget; when you brought me aboard, in the guise of a Martian, you handed me a lingoalter. It was simple to speak the English of the 17th century into it and listen as modern speech came out."

"That's another thing. That Martian suit—how'd you get it?"

"They had come this far. We found the suit, with its occupant long turned to dust. We kept it for such emergencies. When the space ships foundered nearby a few years ago, we refrained from molesting this woman, thinking that she might some day be a fine decoy."

"You watched me in the suit," said Circe.

"We did. We had not seen a human in a long time." The djinni paused, then said, "The Martians had space travel when Earthmen were barbarians. They came to Terra, and we, sensing danger in them, drove them out. We saw to it that the Martians would tell tales of the horrors of Earth life, and never come back."

"By God," said Pink, "that's

why they never colonized Earth, though they had spaceships! It's one of the biggest problems we've known."

"Then I've solved it for you. Will you do me a favor in return?"

"What?"

"Have you any lead left?"

"A little."

"Then lay it on my chest, and give me a quick death."

"Get it," Pink said to Daley. The lieutenant started a protest. Pink said, "My Lord, can't we afford to be merciful now? After all that slaughter?" And Daley went to find the lead.

Circe said, "Why do you want to go to Earth so badly? What's there that you want? You're such an independent form of life . . ."

"Atmosphere," said the djinni:

"But you don't breathe!"

"We do, however, talk; and we cannot hear each other in a vacuum. We wanted to find Earth again and know the pleasure of communication. On Oasis we had to talk with our hands." It groaned, grotesquely human in its agony. "Can you imagine living for centuries without the joy of conversation?" it asked pitifully.

Circe shook her head. "I don't much blame you," she said in a small voice.

Daley came back. He handed a

small rough bar of lead to Pink. The Captain's mind seethed with questions he longed to ask; but the reaction of the battle was settling in with vengeance, and he could not see this great paralyzed brute live on because of his own more or less idle curiosity. He bent forward from the chair. "Sorry," he said, and dropped the bar onto its chest.

"Wait!" said Jerry. "How did you know how to spell *phony*?"

The djinni made a small hissing noise that had something in it of contentment. Its eyes turned jetty, and they knew it was dead.

"It died happy," said Daley to the slim O. O. "It knew it was leaving us a problem that we'd never solve. What a—what a malicious character it was!"

"Poor devil," said Circe. "No conversation for five hundred years!"

CHAPTER XXV

FOUR days later Pinkham and Circe stood quietly before a scanner screen, Pink leaning on a cane, and watched the great lead vat and then the multitude of bottles go tumbling into space. "We are giving them a chance of survival," mused Circe. "There's about one chance in a billion that

some day they'll be found and released again."

"I wonder," said Pink, "if they did predate man in evolution? Or if they were originally native to another planet that expelled 'em? There were always legends of giants and ogres and djinn and demons on earth, myths that started to die out about the time this late friend of ours left the globe for good. Maybe the djinni developed side by side with man, but was limited because of his flaws. There are a million life-forms in the universe so alien to man as to be unexplainable, and a lot of them are right home on Terra."

Circe shook her dark head. "Is

the whole thing real, Pink? Or is it a fantasy we've uncovered out here in the void?"

"Every damn thing about them is scientifically possible. But I know how you feel—it seems like a fairy story. If so many good guys weren't dead back there, I'd disbelieve it myself." He scowled a moment, then looked at her and brightened. "Honey," he said, "remind me that I have to send a radio message to Earth as soon as we're close enough."

"Radio message? What?"

"A sort of temperance warning, that's all." He grinned. "It goes like this: *If you find any bottles, don't open them!*"

THE END

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR



Robert Sheckley



(Concluded from Page 2)

craft plant as assistant metallurgist. I had almost decided that science-fiction wasn't for me, when the great day came. My very first sale—to IMAGINATION. Needless to say; I felt three hundred feet tall that day.

Perversely enough, I wrote very little in the next few months. But after another sale, I quit the aircraft business to devote full time

to free-lancing.

That was almost two years ago. Since then, I've made about sixty sales to most of the science-fiction magazines, plus sales to Colliers, Esquire and Today's Woman. Also sold fifteen television scripts. By and large, free-lancing is as pleasant as I hoped it would be, and I expect to stay at it.

—*Robert Sheckley*

★ Bugless Helicopter ★

THE smartest idea in simplifying helicopters has recently come from France. All it is, is a shift in the location of the driving motor—but it makes all the difference in the world.

As you know, if you've seen or listened to a helicopter, vibration is its biggest drawback. The reason for this is that the power has to be transmitted to the overhead rotors from the engine, through a complicated system of shafting and gearing. In the new helicopter, they get away from that vibration-inducing method by the logical ex-

pedient of putting the engine *overhead*, right beneath the rotors! The result is that the gear-shaft system is eliminated, with its consequent elimination of oscillation and vibration.

Technicians strongly suspect that the final power answer in the helicopter will be some sort of jet-on-the-end-of-the-rotor method, so as to eliminate vibration entirely. The real way to iron out the bugs in helicopters would be to offer build-it-yourself kits to amateurs—a million new ideas would take hold!

* * *



"This used to be my wife's room until she had to go away to that place I was telling you about."

OFF-LIMITS PLANET

by

Robert Sheckley

Four psychotic bipeds vanished somewhere in the galaxy. Naturally they had to be caught — before they spread insanity on a normal world . . .

“**W**HAT a mess!” Gik said, gazing mournfully over the once-beautiful Game Preserve.

The repair crew nodded, and began to sort their tools.

Gik looked around nostalgically. The Game Preserve planet had been one of the show places of the Central Galaxy, a scenic wonderland drawing tourists even from the distant Ktong Universe. Now the place was all but destroyed.

Gik could tell at a glance that many species of animal life, gathered especially for the Preserve, had been obliterated. Whole clans of birds had disappeared. Whole orders of insects were missing, and rare plants had been choked out of existence.

“What’s done is done,” said Gik. Now he had all the work of

reconstruction in front of him. But where to begin? Reforestation?

Utilizing his glyge sense, Gik saw that the damage ran all the way down to the bowels of the Game Preserve Planet.

“And to think,” Gik said aloud, “That this whole mess was the work of four madmen!”

The repair crew looked up immediately. They were dull-witted construction workers recruited from Lis. That little planet lay at the extreme East end of the Central galaxy, where news travels slowly.

“Four madmen, sir?” one asked, with typical Lissic impertinence.

“Two madmen and two madwomen,” Gik said. “You can morigaze the rest while you work.”

But Lis was a backward planet,



and none of its inhabitants knew how to morigaze a complete story from two disconnected though casually related facts.

"You'll hear about it when you get home, then," Gik said.

The workers protested. The destruction of a Game Preserve was shocking, even to their dull sensibilities. They demanded to know how it happened.

"No," said Gik.

"Sir," said a worker, "we will work better if we know."

"What makes you think so?" Gik asked.

"Sir, it has been shown that inducement motives increase geometrically when the gross finite causes of any irreversible action are—"

"None of your damned Hyploxian psychology," Gik growled. It was maddening, to be lectured at by morons! Besides, their terminology was hopelessly jumbled.

But the repair crew clustered around him, showing no interest in the task ahead, their cloddish faces

eager for information. "Well," Gik said, "I'll tell you the beginning and you can vorsatize the rest. Agreed?"

IT started quite some time back, when two psychiatrists named Olg and Loom were piloting their ship back to the Asylum at North Edge. They had a cargo of four psychotics—two madmen and two madwomen—and were conducting them to four safely padded cells.

It was a long hot trip, through the blazing galactic center. The psychiatrists had to thread their way through clusters of blazing white supergiants, dull red dwarfs, and sizzling blue giants.

The four psychotics were resting quietly, since the psychiatrists had drugged them.

Both psychiatrists were tired and thirsty. Therefore, they were sorely tempted when a convenient Refreshery hove in sight, moored to a dark star.

"Asylum work comes first," Olg said.

"True," Loom agreed, several of his tongues hanging out. "But one quick one—"

It didn't take much argument. Their madmen were safely stupefied, and, because of their amazingly short life spans, the psychotics would probably die before they could reach the Asylum in distant

North Edge. It seemed that a few minutes would make no appreciable difference.

Accordingly they anchored and hurried into the Refreshery. Inside, they had two drinks of Vish apiece, and came back out.

Although they had been gone a very short time, as Olg and Loom counted time, ship and psychotics were gone.

"Oh, no," Loom murmured.

"Oh, yes," Olg sighed. He realized that he hadn't taken into account the psychotics' high metabolic rate, a concommittant of short life span. The few moments that Olg and Loom had been gone could have been months to their charges; enough time to recover from the drug, master the controls, and roar away.

"We must find them at once," cried Loom. "Before they land on some civilized world!"

"No need to worry," Olg said. "Any civilized world will return them or their corpses to the Asylum."

"Of course they will," Loom said. "*If they detect them!* Remember, psychotics are capable of almost limitless cunning. They might land at night and conceal themselves, and do—why, they'd do anything! They'd blow up a planet, if they could!"

"And they could," Olg said.

"But let's not get excited." He hurried back into the Refreshery, had another drink of Vish, and commandeered the proprietor's ship. The two psychiatrists got in, then looked at each other hopelessly.

All around them lay the suns of the Central galaxy, millions of stars with tens of millions of planets.

"Think," Olg said. "What would you do first, if you were a psychotic?"

"I'd slalang," Loom said promptly.

"Let's try it, then." Quickly they slalanged the ship into monoradic space, which, in its entire extent, is only eighty yards long by twenty wide, well-lighted, and affording no place to hide.

Annoying enough, the psychotics weren't there.

"Too bad," Loom said. "It would have been so easy to find them here."

"We'll have to search all the planets in this vicinity of space," Olg said.

"I know one way we'll be able to detect their presence," Loom said.

"How's that?" Olg asked.

"When they blow up a planet, we're bound to see the flash."

They set the ship's controls for top speed, in defiance of all galac-

tic speed laws, and headed for Ptis, the nearest inhabited world.

"THAT'S enough," Gik said to his workers. "You can vorsatize the rest. Now to work." He glyged the surface of the Game Preserve.

What he saw there was not heartening. The minerals had been blasted from the ground. The waters were polluted, the forests destroyed, the land masses chopped up.

"You and you," Gik said. "Take that iron ore down four thousand feet and spread it around. Build up to the surface with lighter ores. Let's get rolling now."

Most of the workers had vorsatized the rest of the story. Smiling sadly, they began to work.

"Sir," another worker said, "Some of us can't vorsatize."

"Why not?" Gik asked.

"We're very stupid," the worker said humbly.

"That I can see," Gik said. "But everyone can vorsatize!"

"We can't," the worker said miserably.

"Well, I'll tell you some more. Then you can induct the rest. You can induct, can't you?"

The workers nodded. Gik looked around to make sure the minerals team was working, and went on.

THE Ptis world reported no sign of psychotics. Search parties on Klish and Yegl didn't find anything. Nor was there any report from the Maverni planets, nor from the Calden sun, nor from the Hyboxu Confederation.

"So far, no good," Loom said.

"At least we've established that they're not hiding in the immediate neighborhood," Olg said. "Now we'll pin it down a step farther. Let me see the report on the psychotics."

"It was in our ship," Loom said.

"Fine! Do you remember their classification?"

Loom concentrated deeply. "They were bipeds," he said.

"Oh."

"Yes. I'm sure of it. Bipeds with a 224 metabolism and a fecundity rate high in the 005's."

"That's very bad," Olg said.

"Extremely short life span," Loom said. "Quite possibly they died in space. But we can't take any chances."

"Of course not. Call Galactic Center and get me a list of all biped worlds."

While Loom was getting the list Olg did some serious thinking.

Psychotic bipeds were a great danger.

The biped worlds, because of their short life spans, were usually left alone by Center. Quiet,

ingenious beings, the bipeds were known for their peace-loving, friendly ways.

But add four psychotic bipeds to any normal biped world . . .

The result could be catastrophic!

Bipeds, for all their good qualities, were nature's most delicate creatures. If psychotics were allowed to breed into normal stock, a sizeable percentage of the race could be infected. It had happened before.

Once infected, bipeds were the terror of the galaxy. Biped worlds had been known to go to war—against all and sundry. Hereditary nomads, the bipeds ranged through space, bombing any world that stood in their way. Often they smashed planets out of sheer pique, or used them as refueling stations, or as large targets.

The psychotic bipeds would naturally head for a biped world. They would land, acting quite normal, and be accepted in all good faith . . .

Olg prayed that the local authorities would be alert enough to apprehend them before any intermarriage had occurred.

When Loom returned with the list, they were ready. Swiftly they flew to the nearest biped world, landed, and made contact with the planetary representative.

"Have you any record of recent

psychoses?" they asked the biped.

"I'll have to check the records," the biped said. He hurried to do so, but died of old age before his task was completed.

Olg and Loom cursed their bad luck. They had hit a world where the life span was unusually short, even for bipeds.

His successor took over, while Olg and Loom waited and fumed.

"What was the question?" the new planetary representative asked.

"Psychotics?" Loom asked, very rapidly, in order for the biped to have time to answer.

As fast as Loom could speak, it took years, as the bipeds measured time.

"I don't—" the biped began, and died.

His successor, fortunately, was a youth. The lad had time to check the records and tell them no, before he died of advanced old age.

"At this rate," Loom said, back in their ship, "We'll never catch up with them."

Olg looked unhappy. This, of course, was why Central usually left the bipeds alone. It was next to impossible to talk to them, except over several generations.

The psychiatrists knew that it was entirely possible that the psychotics had begun to infect a popu-

lation already. Their descendants might be spreading the seeds of destruction further.

If so, they had to discover and isolate the polluted segment of the race.

"How many more biped worlds are there?" Olg asked.

"One hundred and four," Loom said.

With sinking hopes, the psychiatrists got under way again.

"AND the rest is obvious," Gik said. "You can easily induct it from there."

Smiles lighted the brutish faces of the Lis workers. Inducting happily, they returned to their work.

Gik saw that the minerals crew was doing nicely. He directed the scattering of diamonds next, for esthetic effect.

Another team was assigned the task of rebuilding a range of stubby mountains. After that, eight major rivers had to be deflected to their natural courses, and millions of square miles of grass had to be replanted. And even that was only the beginning.

"A thorough mess," Gik said to himself. He sniffed the air, and decided that it would have to be shipped out and cleaned, before being really fit to breathe.

"Sir," said a voice at Gik's shoulder.

"Don't bother me," Gik said. After purifying the air, he would have to restore its natural fragrance. That would require several million tons of—

"Sir," the voice said again.

Gik turned, and saw a tiny, wizened worker.

"What is it?"

"Sir—I can't induct."

"You can't induct! What did you learn in school?"

"Not very much, sir," the little worker said miserably. "Sir—won't you tell me the rest?"

"Stop bothering me," Gik said. "Even without inducting, you should be able to work out the rest."

"No sir," the little worker said. "Not accurately. I perceive, of course, the direct implied casual relationship between the wrecked Game Preserve and the escape and assumed subsequent race reintegration of the psychotic bipeds. But I ask myself, is it a one-to-one bearing, a progression in logical arithmeticism, or are there imperceptible but course-changing overtones, gap-bridging potentials emerging, and the like? I ask myself, according to the former major hypothesis, was a war then begun by a psychotic strain on a biped planet in which one of the attrition points was the Game Preserve? If so, what should I expect,

morphologically? Was the Game Preserve used as (a) a refueling station, (b) a target area, (c) a general base of operations, to explore only the more obvious of the series? Or, to explore a second major hypothesis, could not the original escaped psychotics have gone to *two* biped worlds, separated though conjoined? I would judge a small operational probability for this, since, after all, it takes two to make a war. One defective biped race could, conceivably, have been held in check or the occurrence reported to Center. But with two—and this is only a supposition based on a shaky hypothesis—we have all the quasi-logical foundations for a war. However, going back to the first major hypothesis—"

"Spare me your dull-witted chatter," Gik said.

"I'm sorry, sir," the worker said.

"You're wrong," Gik said.

"I was afraid so," the worker said, sniffling back tears.

"And you're remarkably stupid."

"I know it," the worker said.

"Get back to work. There's a lot to be done."

"Yes sir." The wizened little worker drew back his tail, preparatory to frustration-suicide. But Gik stopped him.

"I'm short-handed as it is," he said. "If you promise to get right

back to work, I'll tell you the rest."

"Oh, I will sir!" the little worker said.

"Very well," Gik said. "Now then—"

AFTER checking fifty-four biped worlds, the psychiatrists still had not found the missing psychotics. Their search pattern loomed in front of them, clear out to the galactic rim.

They knew that the original madmen were long since dead. Now the problem was their descendants, if any.

As they roared toward the fifty-fifth biped world, Loom detected a beat in his wave detector.

They focused, and the wave grew into a typical psychotic pattern, clearly amplified.

They got a fix and hurried over, ignoring all galactic speed laws. Without delay, they landed.

It was obvious at once that this was a strange world. Usually, bipeds were careful about breeding quotas, since, as a race, they were slightly claustrophobic. But on this world they had spawned limitlessly.

And the marks of infection were manifest, even at a casual glance. Wars were raging over the face of the planet; millions were starving.

More millions were diseased, or crippled.

Illing with the Ill sense, the psychiatrists saw that the tremendous population was unable to feed itself, and was equally unable to control its breeding. This was proof of insanity right there.

And to make matters worse, co-operation, usually so prized among bipeds, operated only spasmodically here.

On top of all this, these bipeds had artificially split themselves into races and subraces, and invented separate classifications within the classifications.

• This was the final proof of psychosis, since bipeds were indivisibly the children of one race, and one race only.

This was where the psychotics had landed.

"The question now is," Loom said, "how many—and what—other worlds have they infected? How many planets have they blasted, sacked, ripped apart, destroyed?"

They illed and elged the information carefully, already certain of the answer. Bipeds were natural-born spacers, and insane bipeds always spread to the stars.

Olg saw the answer first. For an instant he was unable to believe it. Then Loom saw it.

"These bipeds," Loom said,

"have never been in contact with any others. They've never been in space!"

It was unbelievable—but true. These bipeds had never been able to develop space travel. Nor had their neighbors given it to them.

Olg checked the list of biped worlds, and found the answer.

This was no biped world. These bipeds had spawned on the Game Preserve!

"That's it," Loom said. "The original four didn't go to a biped world. Instead they landed on a Game Preserve, where no one would look for them. Their descendants reverted to savagery, and spawned—"

"And spawned," Olg broke in. "*How* they spawned!"

"What a pity," Loom said. "Every one of these bipeds is a descendant of the original four."

"They've certainly done a job on the Game Preserve," Olg said. "Temporarily, we'll have to re-classify it. What do the natives call this place?"

Loom illed the answer. "They call it Earth," he said.

"Call the repair crew," Olg said. "And hurry, before they blow the planet to pieces."

"At least," Loom said, "They didn't infect any of the normal biped worlds."

"So that's it," the little worker said.

"That's it," Gik said. "And of course, we're left with all the repair work on this butchered planet."

The worker picked up his tools. Then he turned back to Gik.

"Where are the inhabitants now?" he asked.

"Well, naturally they couldn't be left *here*," Gik said carelessly. "Psychotics belong in padded cells, in the Asylum." He paused. "The inhabitants were quite upset about it, naturally. I believe the psychiatrists had to send for three billion strait jackets.

"Now will you kindly get to work?"

The little worker nodded. With exquisite delicacy he began to rebuild a shattered granite mountain.

THE END

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"Listen to this character after I ask him some damn-fool question about the possibility of interplanetary travel!"

A man from the stars would be looked upon with suspicion until his purpose was known. So it was with Aries, but he calmed Earth's fears with incredible gifts of science — seemingly a —

COSMIC SANTA CLAUS

by

Daniel F. Galouye

Contact shall be neither startling nor abrupt. It shall initially demonstrate, beyond any possibility of misinterpretation, that the uninitiated culture has no cause for consternation; that no aggression is intended . . .

THE coruscating metallic ovoid hovered over Washington for an entire day after making its initial appearance with the dawn of a Monday morning.

Even before it was sighted visually, it appeared on three radar screens in the form of a luminous patch deposited there by the circling sweep beam.

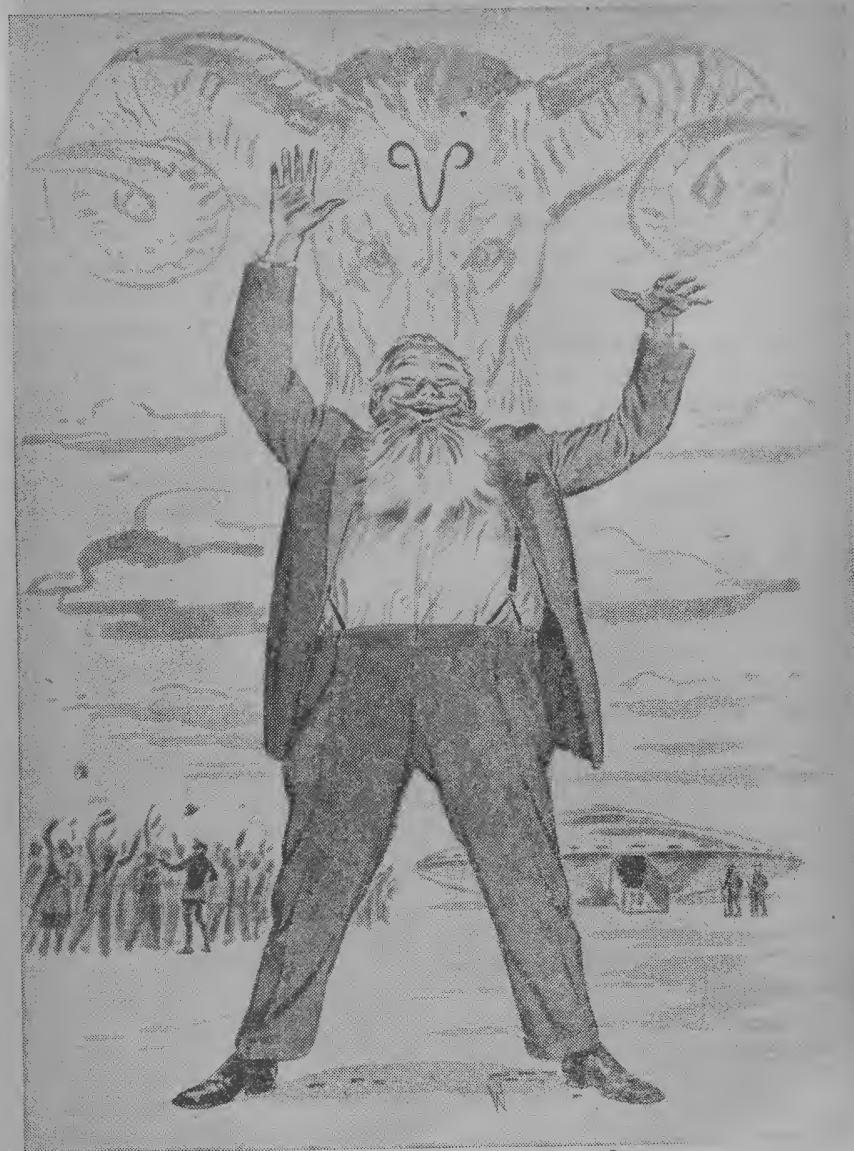
By nine o'clock an interceptor had swung aloft, boxed in the area described in the initial report, and radioed back that he could sight nothing suspicious.

But that was perhaps because he was looking up, not down—not between the green, round forms of the trees that dot Anacostia Park.

By eleven, however, the object had been reported successively over Union Depot, the Capitol, the National Gallery of Art, the National Museum, Washington Monument and the White House.

The first interceptor squadron took off from Anacostia Naval Air Station shortly before noon. Contact was made immediately over the Potomac River in the vicinity of Arlington Memorial Bridge.

Eighteen Banshee jets emptied their fifty calibre machine gun magazines after receiving no visible response to an order to land and after unsuccessfully attempting to herd the object to their



base. They unleashed their total load of rockets, regrouped, then returned to the field to report all efforts ineffective.

Four more squadrons attacked during mid-afternoon. And, before night had come, at least a dozen anti-aircraft batteries had fired hundreds of rounds at the low maneuvering silvery form.

At dusk, it landed at Washington National Airport immediately in front of the Administration Building.

Before midnight, long after all air operations had been cancelled at the field, it had been ringed in by two artillery companies and an entire infantry division—all under orders to hold their fire.

At dawn, a previously indiscernible hatch in the side of the huge ship swung out.

Mortar crews snapped into position beside their weapons.

Field pieces readjusted their aims to cover various portions of the craft.

Grenade throwers hugged the ground beneath the muzzles of the big guns.

Riflemen, prone because of the point-blank range of the artillery, brought up their guns instinctively.

Lieutenant General Hollerman sped in his jeep to a point in the

defense ring opposite the opening hatch.

A metallic thud rang across the field as the swinging partition reached its full-throw position.

A small, dumpy man stepped out, his tweed jacket flung across his left arm. He was almost bald, his smooth scalp shining against a curlicue of white fuzz that ringed his head. There was a rhythm of form to his arching mustache and flowing alabaster beard. But the superabundance of hair on his face failed to dominate the ruddy, bulbous cheeks and the almost spherical nose.

Surveying the ring defense with eyes that danced in expression of amused delight, he swabbed his brow with a handkerchief and smiled.

"Hello," he said. "Dodgers still on top?"

Extreme caution shall be exercised in establishing, through observation, qualification of candidate culture . . .

"YOU might, by way of an understatement," admitted the Army Chief of Staff, staring out the window into the Pentagon parking area, "call it incredible."

He turned to look at Secretary of Defense Arthurs. "But I'd say

it's nothing less than fantastic." Arthurs drummed his fingers on the desk impatiently. "Where is he now, General Barrow?"

"They're leaving the airport." "Just leaving?"

"Hollerman was told to conduct initial questioning there. They finished only minutes ago."

"And I suppose they're being followed by ten thousand gawking civilians and a corps of newspapermen?"

"Fortunately not." Barrow smiled feebly, going over to the desk. "An old man with a beard might attract some attention—but not as much as if it had been an outlandish — uh, thing that had gotten out of that contraption. But there's plenty enough in the papers as it is.

It was twelve. But there was no customary flurry of noontime activity outside. Instead, it seemed to Barrow, there was portentous calm; a lurking stillness that almost shouted the unprecedented significance of the day.

"Human!" Secretary Arthurs shook his head incredulously.

"Of that," suggested the General, "we should be grateful."

"But how . . . "

"He told Hollerman he is a representative—an intermediary."

"Of the Algolians," Arthurs said

knowingly. "But what are Algolians?"

"The old man says they are creatures that come from something like five hundred million miles across space."

"Creatures?"

Barrow nodded. "He told Hollerman that's why they sent him. Because they're not human."

Arthurs frowned.

"The old man," Barrow continued, "said the Algolians realize that culture can't meet culture from a standing start; that they must have a common basis of contact . . . That's his role. They are supposed to have borrowed him from earth as a baby a few decades ago and brought him up so he would be used to them, would understand them. At the same time they trained him in earth culture too so he would know both."

"Trained him in earth culture?" the Secretary repeated awkwardly.

"By what he called remote penetro-video and penetro-audio observation instruments — or something like that."

The Secretary uttered an "Oh" which conveyed nothing.

Barrow turned to stare impatiently out the window again.

Arthurs was silent a moment. Then, "And what does he say these—Algolians want?"

The General shrugged. "Nothing. Only contact now. Later perhaps, if we qualify technologically and in other respects, commerce—exchange of materials. But right now they only want to help us."

The General and the Secretary silently studied each other with unspoken suspicion.

"We've temporarily impounded the craft, of course?" Arthurs asked.

"Naturally. But the old man didn't seem to mind; laughed about it; said the Algolians intended for us to accept it as a gift. He'd like to borrow it after we get through studying it, though, so he can report back to them."

The Secretary of Defense resumed drumming his fingers meditatively on the polished desk top.

"What do you think of it, Frank?" he asked finally.

"Hell, Bob, I don't like it."

ONLY minutes later, the old man sat in the chair across the desk from the Secretary. He was flanked by Generals Hollerman and Barrow.

"Aries," he said, responding to Arthurs' personal question. "That's the only name they gave me. It's descriptive of the time of the year that I became associated with the Algolians, as determined by the

earth Zodiac."

The answer failed to dissipate the cumbersome reticence of the three officials.

The old man leaned back and laughed jovially. It was a deep belly laugh and the joggling motion of his prominent midsection was imparted even to the chair.

"Gentlemen," he said, his eyes blinking friendly, "this is no death vigil. For me, it's homecoming! For us—humanity—it's the start of a new age!"

Barrow folded his arms, glanced at Secretary Arthurs, then studied the old man through narrowed eyes. "And what is required of us to—qualify for this new age, Mr. Aries?"

"Not mister — just Aries." Laughter returned to his eyes. "We have already been accepted, so to speak. We now face, shall we say, a preparatory period wherein we will make ourselves worthy of association with other cultures. In the centuries to come, the Algolians realize, we will be in contact with many other races who cannot let themselves become known to us now because of a code of behavior which they must follow. If we are not prepared, we may find ourselves in the position of accepting baubles instead of merchandise of like value."

Arthurs folded his hands on the desk top. "These Algolians. What are they like?"

"I suppose," Aries smiled warmly, fingering his beard, "you would describe them as monstrous. That's why it was necessary to have an intermediary. But after you become acquainted with them through me you will acquire a different appreciation of them."

"When do they put in their appearance?" Barrow asked.

"Not for a year or so. You must first achieve space. Regulations require that."

Barrow did not take his eyes from the man. There was something about him that was almost hypnotic. Intently, he groped for the association . . . If the tweed suit were replaced by a red costume with a broad black belt—if the almost bald head were covered by a red cap with a white cotton ball on top—if he wore shiny black boots instead . . .

"You are perhaps wondering," Aries continued complaisantly as he played with several paper clips in a tray on the desk, "why an intermediary should be an old man. There are two reasons. First, my appearance symbolically demonstrates benevolent motivation. Then too, it required a good deal of time to become familiar with the

technology that I'm to pass on to you."

While he spoke he straightened five of the metal clips and reshaped them into various designs of coils and angles.

"Took years to learn the principles behind this." He laid the wire sections in a circular series with their ends touching, except for a small breach in the circuit. "But of course I've prepared treatises that will enable you to grasp such things immediately."

From his pocket he withdrew a small object that appeared to be a gray, porous rock; he laid it across the open ends of the circuit.

The desk shuddered, raised a foot in the air and remained suspended there.

Hollerman and Barrow leaped up, turning their chairs over. Arthurs leaned far back, as though cringing from the desk, his eyes staring.

Aries laughed deeply, holding his stomach in amusement. Then slowly he removed the stone from the wires. The desk sank to the floor. He replaced the rock in his pocket.

"I had hoped for an audience with the highest official," he said, looking at the Secretary. "But you have the authority to gather the men we'll need. I'll have to see

your most competent physician, physicist and rocket engineer . . . all engaged in research, of course."

The three men frowned.

Aries answered with an amused laugh. "When you have gifts of the nature that I have, you must present them to the persons most qualified to understand and interpret them for others of lesser intellectual ability."

"Gifts?" repeated Barrow and Arthurs simultaneously.

"Technological achievements," explained Aries, "that will make us eligible for contact with the Algo-lians and others."

Pathological advance shall take precedence in criteria of qualification. Unless disease has been eliminated through ultimate pathological methods, said culture shall be considered disqualified. Under no conditions shall an impure culture be permitted to associate with a biologically cleansed species . . .

So you see, Dr. Paulington," it was Aries' voice coming lustily through the doorway from the next room of the suite overlooking the Potomac, "pathology becomes quite simple when the factors are viewed in their true nature."

Arthurs and Barrow looked won-

deringly at each other, then glanced into the other room where Aries stood with a thick printed manuscript in his hand.

"I don't quite understand . . ." Paulington began hesitatingly.

"The germ theory," Aries went on patiently, "represented a considerable advance, and in the right direction, over the idea of spontaneous generation of disease. But it's still two levels above the reality of the situation. Our key of correlation lies not with micro-organisms, not with viruses — but rather on the stratum of the chemical protein molecule itself."

Only Paulington's anxious breathing came from the room.

Aries laughed at his confusion. "Within two hours," he encouraged, "you'll understand it. But first we must concede that the molecule itself, or rather inherent variations in the molecule, is responsible for the pathogenic potentialities of both the virus and the microbe; that the variations are ordered and are directly related with the diverse diseases, and that they are controlled by *simple methods* . . . Here," he drew the doctor beside him and turned several pages of the manuscript. "First we'll take the broad category of infectious diseases—"

The dominant, bass voice low-

ered and Barrow and Arthurs turned to stare out the window.

"Get a rough going over by the press?" Arthurs asked.

"Rough as hell," Barrow swore. "They were like flies."

"What did you tell them?"

"Everything." General Barrow shrugged indifferently. "You said no secrecy lid."

Secretary Arthurs shrugged. "Couldn't very well keep the covers on something like this, could you? The people wouldn't stand for it."

He motioned down into the street below.

Barrow stared at the restless thousands, held back by a line of troops standing at parade rest, bayonets bared.

"Imagine what it would be like," Arthurs suggested, "if we hadn't taken over the whole building."

"I don't see why we didn't refer Aries over to the State Department. Seems to me it would be their squawling brat."

"Tried to," the Secretary said wistfully. "But Aries won't bounce. Jarvis said no soap at the cabinet meeting last night. Said that if we got all the—gifts that Aries promised, he didn't see why it wouldn't fit in the category of national defense knowledge. Jarvis indicated

he may take over later—after we get through."

Aries' voice welled through the open door. "And the basic instruments I brought can be used as models. I'll have them delivered as soon as you say."

"This afternoon?" Paulington asked weakly.

"This afternoon," Aries laughed spiritedly, "if you'll indicate which ones you want first."

General Barrow stared down thoughtfully into his moist palms. It was *so much* like Santa, he thought, with a pop-eyed youngster on his knee, asking him what he wanted for Christmas and telling him . . .

"I asked this yesterday," Arthurs interrupted. "I'm going to ask it again: What do you think, Frank?"

Barrow's eyes switched to study his other palm. "Again. Hell, I don't like it. Why would anybody want to give us something for nothing?"

Arthurs shrugged. "I can conceive of ourselves doing the same for, say, a savage tribe in Africa."

The General laughed emotionlessly. "If we thought we could make friends and trade off some dime-store necklaces for uranium ore."

"No," Arthurs protested. "Look

at the missionariés. They go down among the primitives—”

“Even they have a pitch. They are after souls. Everybody's after something.”

The Secretary conceded listlessly. “Perhaps so—with humanity. But, can we classify and judge the Algolians according to human standards? Anyway, there's an adage: Don't look a gift horse . . .”

No culture ignorant of the A-Prime energy spectrum and its applications shall be deemed entitled to the benefits of contact. To admit such a culture would be inviting a situation wherein the vigor and resources of one or several superior cultures would be squandered in a benevolent gesture on an immature people . . .

“COME in,” Aries urged, smiling broadly, “I'm not the least bit sensitive about having an audience while I'm dressing.”

From the doorway, General Barrow watched him buckle his belt, refusing to gather in any of the superfluous flesh by tightening it even one notch beyond what was required to hold his trousers up.

“I have a morning paper,” the General offered dully. “It's all about the—knowledge you gave Paulington yesterday.”

Aries turned, running a brush languidly through his beard. “Has he tried any of the pathological methods?”

“Enough to have already announced apparent total cures for cancer and three other diseases.”

The old man's eyes flashed his merriment. “Fine! It is encouraging to see results so soon . . . Have you arranged for the physicist?”

“He's here now.” The Army Chief of Staff tossed the paper on the bed. Then he turned searching, submissive eyes on the other. “Aries, it's Wednesday. Two days ago you arrived. Since then you've gained the trust of everybody who can read a newspaper. Now, I'm not an unduly suspicious man, but—”

“And why shouldn't I have gained everybody's confidence?” Aries interrupted in a mildly mocking tone. “I am one of you. Of course it's only by accident, but I'm the one who was selected to bring a new era to earth—to send progress leaping ahead perhaps two, perhaps three thousand years.”

He opened the closet, slid out a suitcase and swung back its lid. It was filled with stapled stacks of printed papers.

“I have only two more of these,” he said, holding up one of the

manuscripts, "to present personally to recipients. There are over a score of treatises that will be left with you to distribute to the proper individuals or institutions. They represent proportionate thousand-year advances in other fields."

"After you present them—then what?"

Aries tapped Barrow's shoulder affectionately. "Then I shall return to the Algolians and report—and wait for earth ships to come out into space and meet us there."

Aries' grin was effusive. Barrow smiled weakly in an unenthusiastic response. If it was as the old man said—if he would merely leave his 'gifts' and return from where he had come—then maybe he would take the irrepressible aura of suspicion with him. Or *was* there an aura of suspicion? Barrow wondered if it were only he who was reserved in his acceptance of Aries.

The old man put on his coat, indicating he was ready to enter the other room.

"I've already ordered your breakfast," Barrow said as they went through the doorway.

"Excellent! And the physicist is . . . ?"

"Dr. Wallertz. Baldon Wallertz."

Secretary Arthurs and the man

who sat beside him rose from the divan at the other end of the room.

Aries went directly over to the latter.

"Once," he began sonorously, without waiting for an introduction, "we were completely unaware of the existence of electricity. You are familiar with its discovery and harnessing. Of course, electromagnetism is actually a form of energy transmission, but it's suitable here as a reference to show that forces may exist of which we are not aware until we perfect the instruments to detect and utilize them."

Wallertz shifted uneasily, apparently wondering whether he was expected to say something.

But Aries went on. "Just as utilization of electricity was a dormant potentiality, so is yet another energy source—what is universally referred to as A-Prime energy.

"It has spectromatic characteristics. It exists in inert form throughout what you have, until recently, referred to as the ether. It makes obsolete the need for coal, gasoline—everything you have used until now—as a means of producing power. You would have discovered A-Prime energy, perhaps, after several hundred years of experimenting with nucleonics . . . But if you'll come with me, Dr.

Wallertz, we'll take a shortcut through those centuries."

Aries led the physicist off into a second reception room, stopping at the door of the bedroom to get a portfolio.

Arthurs turned to the General. "Still don't like it?"

"Still . . . How about you?"

"I was a bit suspicious for a while. But, what the hell? What *can* happen? The old guy's giving us knowledge that can't do anything but good. Then he's going to go back where he came from. Everything'll be the same — except that we'll be a couple of thousand years more advanced than we are now."

The General was meditatively silent.

"What did you have in mind, Frank?" Arthurs went on, half smiling. "Something Orson Wellish? Hell, these Algolians wouldn't make us *smarter* first."

Barrow inspected his hands again, as though he might find now what he had missed yesterday.

"Aries . . ." he said absently, tracing on his palm a straight line that branched off at the top into two half circles. "The sign of the Ram."

The Secretary looked quizzically at him.

"Aries," he mused aloud. "The

first constellation of the Zodiac. Pictured as a Ram." He stared thoughtfully at the other.

After a moment he went on. "Ever been around a slaughtering house? Cattle-swine — you can drive them from the pens to the slaughterer. But you can't drive sheep. The meatpackers get around that problem, though. For you can *lead* a sheep. A trained ram does the job efficiently. In the industry they call it a Judas Ram."

Candidate culture must have conquered space. Perfection of interstellar devices, however, shall not be deemed a necessary acquisition. The minimum standard is interplanetary travel within the system in question . . .

THE door opened and closed softly. Still holding on to the knob, the thin, middle-aged man passed a folded handkerchief over his forehead and looked down thoughtfully at the bulky manuscript protruding from the baggy pocket of his jacket.

Arthurs stared expectantly at him. "Learn anything about rocketry?" he asked facetiously.

Dr. James Starkton nodded coming across the room. "Enough to know the answers to everything that stumped us on his ship. But,

will we be able to apply the knowledge?"

"I've just spoken with the White House. And I might say I detected nothing but amazement when I told the President that an entire space program would cost us less than the appropriation for the last flattop and that it could be completed within a year."

"You explained, of course, that was because no research would be involved?"

The Secretary nodded. "And he had no doubt but what he can get double or triple that appropriation. He said that instead of twenty ships he wants a fleet of at least fifty . . . Where's Aries?"

A roar welled from the throng inside, as though in answer to the question.

"He seemed rather amused with the idea of the official parade," said Starkton. "He went on down."

Somewhere below a band struck up "Here Comes Santa Claus." But the music was drowned out by a surge in volume of the cheering voices.

Arthurs went over to the window and looked down as Aries emerged from the building, flanked by six bodyguards. But he brushed them aside and went alone to the open Limousine waving to his admirers.

He tossed kisses to either side of the street and bowed, but remained standing in the back of the car. Whistles blew, motorcycles coughed to life and the parade moved off.

When the Secretary turned around, Starkton had gone and General Barrow was entering.

"Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday," Arthurs said, enumerating the days on his fingers, "and we still don't have any justification for your suspicion."

"Suspicion?" The General went over and turned on the television set, smiling for the first time in the week. "That's something I can't very well have much of any more. He's leaving and there still aren't any strings tied to the gifts . . . Anyway, it's like you said—why should they smarten us up first?"

The screen flickered and he adjusted a dial. "Know something, Bob? I'm rather anxious to meet these Algolians."

He drew a picture from his pocket. "They don't look as monstrous as I thought they would at first. At least, they've got two arms, two legs and a head."

Barrow turned back to the screen. The parade was swinging onto Pennsylvania Avenue. The camera, looking down on the Limousine, showed Aries standing with

feet planted wide and his head thrown back, laughing. His hands, fingers spread apart, were held tightly against his shaking stomach. And his beard rippled in the breeze of the ride.

"I suppose," Arthurs said, "we will have to give the Algolians credit for a good deal of foresight and a thorough understanding of human nature. I wonder how receptive we would have been if they had sent anyone except a kindly old man?"

Another camera took up transmission, panning the Pandemonium among the spectators.

"Welcome, Space Santa!" banners were hoisted high over the heads of the throng. Streamers and confetti rained down on the automobile and marching soldiers.

"We want the Algolians!" was the repeated chorus of thousands along one entire block as the procession passed.

Fifty-foot tall pictures of Algolians, produced from photographs released by Aries on the second to last day of his visit, draped every other building along a two-block stretch.

Aries buttons the size of oranges clung to almost every other lapel while women waved red and white corsages with jingle bells attached.

Barrow turned his attention from

the screen. "When's he coming back?"

"Not until we go out to meet him," the Secretary answered regretfully.

"But where will we find him?" Barrow asked puzzled.

"Somewhere between here and Pluto. But we don't have to worry. The ships we're going to build will take us anywhere in the system."

The Limousine drew to a stop in front of the White House, a camera at a vantage point there picking up the action.

Another individual in formal dress entered the car, shook Aries' hand and sat down. The tumultuous roar increased, but it was evident that none of the ovation was intended for the President as the Limousine moved off again with him and the old man.

Out Fourteenth Street it went, past the Executive Buildings and the Washington Monument, across the Potomac and along Mt. Vernon Memorial Highway to the National Airport, hardly leaving the field of one video camera before it was picked up by another.

The car stopped next to the ship when it arrived at the airport. After throwing a score more kisses, together with his merry laughter, out over the crowd, Aries entered

the gleaming craft.

The airport throng waved and shouted deliriously as the hatch closed. Then the ship rose silently, swiftly.

General Barrow turned the television receiver off and crossed to the door of the suite.

"Where are you going?" asked Secretary Arthurs.

The General's smile was one of weary relief. "Out to buy myself an Aries button."

... Only if the above-prescribed standards are met shall contact with an uninitiated culture be permissible. It then becomes the direct responsibility of the initial observer to appraise said culture of the existence of and articles embodied in the Galactic Convention

...

OUTSIDE the atmosphere, Aries set course and rose from the control chair. Within a year, he thought, they would have sent dozens of ships out from their planet.

He went over to a locker and withdrew a flask, uncorked it and applied its liquid to his face.

He had done his job well indeed. And in all probability his reward

would be nothing less than a planetary governorship.

With a square of rough cloth, he rubbed his face brusquely. The crimson, bulbous nose and the cherubic cheeks came off first. Then the whiskers and shining pate and ears and fringe hair around his temples.

... Aggression against such cultures as not qualified according to the rules outlined in this Handbook of Intragalactic Behavior shall be punishable by isolation of aggressor-species, deprivation of all intersystem commerce and travel, and death of responsible representatives.

YES, Aries mused, readjusting course a fraction of a degree so that he would not miss the Algolian fleet out beyond the final orbit in the system, they had written the rules well to protect cultures unable to defend themselves—unqualified cultures.

He disrobed and went to work on his paunch with the liquid and towel.

But the rules didn't say anything about *qualifying* a race and ... waiting.

THE END

FOR BACK ISSUES OF IMAGINATION - SEE PAGE 129



You're certain to be included in a survey at one time or another. However, there's one you may not recognize as such. Chances are it will be more important than you imagine. It could be man's—

Prelude To Space

By

Robert W. Haseltine

I WAS climbing the steep side of a central Wisconsin hill, holding my bow away from my body for balance, when I first saw the stranger. He sat on a stump at the crest and watched me struggle up. As I drew nearer I panted out a greeting and received his cheerful "Hi" in return. When I finally reached the top I threw myself on the ground and began catching my breath.

He didn't say anything at first, just looked at the bow and the quiver of arrows on my back. Finally he said, "May I look at it?" and reached for the bow. I handed it to him. He examined it carefully and returned it.

"Beautiful workmanship. Is that all you use?" he asked.

"I never cared much for guns," I answered. "I've always thought a bow gave the animal more of an

even chance for his life."

We talked then on the various aspects of hunting and how the crisp fall air seemed to make the deer seem closer than during the heat of summer. While we talked I tried to place the reason he disturbed me, but I couldn't seem to do it. He was dressed in an old plaid shirt and dungarees and his blond hair wasn't many shades removed from my own straw thatch. But there was something odd about him that I couldn't quite find.

"Perhaps it's the cloth." His words surprised me. "You see, it hasn't been discovered on this planet as yet. "My face must have shown astonishment because he went on in the same vein. "I admit it's confusing, but it's also true. My clothes weren't made on Earth." He chuckled then, deep in his throat. "I don't blame you for being confused. I know how I would feel if I met an extraterrestrial being before space travel was a reality."

I kept staring at him. Finally I blurted out, "What in Sam Hill are you talking about?"

He leaned forward on the stump and his face grew earnest. "You might say I'm a poll taker. I have to decide certain things from various interviews with individuals I meet."

"What are you trying to prove?"

I asked.

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that until I'm finished with the interview. If I told you your interest in the subject would tend to prejudice your answers."

"Fair enough. What do you want to ask me?"

He pulled out a notebook and smiled. "These questions may seem a little silly but I must have straight answers to them. Will you go along with me?"

I nodded my head.

"Let's see now. If you were the head of a government and wanted to ascertain whether another country was ready for admission into the United Nations; what would you do?"

I shrugged. "I suppose I would read books and magazines from the country and possibly have an interview with the heads of the government. After I had collected my data I could then act upon it."

"For the sake of argument suppose the books and other periodicals were written so as to be prejudicial in favor of the government, and the heads also were coloring what they said."

I thought for a minute. "In that case I suppose I would secretly place someone inside the country to interview the people and get a first hand view of the situation. Then I would act on his data."

HE nodded his head. "Yes, the people themselves and the conditions they live in will give you the needed data." He turned a page in the book. "Now suppose that you wished to know if a certain planet was ready to enter into an organization such as the Galactic Federation, what would you do?"

"I suppose I'd act as I did before. Place people inside the various areas of the planet to interview and observe. They would bring back the information needed to ascertain whether they would be an asset or a detriment to the organization."

I thought to myself that the question was a triflé silly; after all, hadn't science proved that life couldn't exist on the other planets in our system?

He relaxed after I answered and his smile was brighter than the previous ones. "Right," he said. "Naturally we had to learn the language first, but now a first hand check can be made. You see, there is a civilization out there," he raised his hand and swept the sky, "and we have to check to see if this planet is ready to take its place as an adult civilization with the rest of us.

"Earth within a very short time, will be reaching her fingers into space. Once she gets there she will

be eligible to join the Galactic Federation."

"That's all right," I said, "then we can exchange culture and knowledge with other civilizations."

"Yes, if you are eligible to join."

"But you said that once we reach space we will be eligible."

"Look at it this way," he said. "The main purpose of the Galactic Foundation is to promote peace and understanding among the various planets. Earth would have to be prepared to take its place as just another member, and not an important member at that. Earth, you see, is one of the smaller planets and also would be the latest one to join."

"In times past some planets have reached space without being fully prepared for what they would find. They still had internal troubles on their own worlds. We had to place them in quarantine until they reached that dégree of civilization where they were ready to live in peace. Now we check a planet before it reaches the space travel stage. We find out the reactions of the inhabitants to certain situations."

"What sort of situations?" I asked.

"Well, naturally we want to see their artifacts as an indication as to their advancement. We have to know what the average man thinks

of space travel and trade with other planets. And their ideas on peace and their feelings towards their fellow men. All are very important.

"Actually, when a planet once enters the Federation the people are the ones to decide on peace and war. So if the majority of the people on a planet are peace-loving that planet is ready to enter the Federation."

"But how do you find out all these things?" I asked. "When a man finds out what you are trying to prove he may lie because he wants to get into space."

His eyes held a mischievous glint as he answered. "Simple, the art of telepathy has been highly developed among my race. I have your thoughts on everything I've mentioned. Later, when all the data from thousands of similar interviews is in it will be evaluated and the decision made as to whether your world will be allowed to

reach space. We have the means of keeping you from it if we decide you aren't yet ready."

He stood up and I followed suit. "I must be going now," he sighed. "This work keeps me on the run and I have many more interviews to make. Believe me, it was a pleasure meeting you. I hope we meet again—later." We shook hands and he strolled over the hill into the valley.

Perhaps I should have followed him, but it wouldn't have done any good, really. Because a few moments later I saw something shimmering over the top of the hill. It was big and disc-shaped and shot into the sky with a speed that was unbelievable.

I still don't know what to think about him or what we talked about. I'm going to keep watching the papers though, and hoping he got the right answers. If we reach the Moon I'll know he did . . .



"... due at the Spaceport in ten minutes—find that helmet yet?"

Greg tried desperately to find an illegal method of joining his family on Mars; for the law said that no healthy man could land on a—

CANCER WORLD

By

Harry Warner, Jr.

“WE won the Patagonian trust case,” Greg Marson’s jubilant tones filled the apartment — the hall in which he stood, the automatic kitchen in the rear, the living quarters, bedroom and nursery in between.

But no one replied. Greg let his bulging, expensive briefcase slip to the floor, strode through the empty hall, poked his head into the kitchen, then entered the nursery.

Dennis dashed to his father on two-year-old legs, and baby Phyllis gurgled twice in her pen. Greg wrinkled his nose in puzzlement, then punched the babyviewer.

“You can cut service,” he told the girl whose blonde head appeared on the screen.

She nodded, counted on her fingers, and said: “That will be seven hours of viewing. No extras.

The children behaved beautifully.”

The screen darkened. Greg stared foolishly at it, then turned to Dennis.

“Where’d your mother go?”

Dennis smiled vaguely, and began to tinker with his molecule builder. Phyllis gurgled again.

Greg looked at the remains of the lunch that had hopped automatically from its can at noon, and the lowered reservoir of milk in the baby’s feeder. Dora obviously hadn’t been there since morning, and she didn’t like to trust the babyview service so long. It was Wednesday, and bridge club was Tuesday. They’d subscribed to the telebuying service, so Dora hadn’t gone shopping for months. The new baby wasn’t due for five months, so a hurry-up trip to a doctor was unlikely . . .

The front door screeched, its bad hinge audible in the nursery,



and Greg relaxed. "I'm back here, Dora," he called, and headed for the hall, closing the nursery door behind him.

Greg saw the policeman before he saw Dora. She was being lead toward the living room sofa, her face white, her coat soiled.

"What's wrong?" Greg rushed forward.

"You're Marson? Relax. Your wife just got excited for a minute. Lots of them try what she did. We won't hold it against her."

Dora pressed close to Greg, her head pushing against his chest, her body trembling. Reproachfully, the policeman was saying:

"You should have stayed home on her check day. If she could have reached you when she heard the news—" He brushed invisible specks from his spotless uniform and walked out of the apartment.

Greg led his wife to the sofa and sank down beside her. Check day. He stared at her with disbelief.

"I'm sorry," she said in a whisper, not looking at him. "You never could remember anniversaries or dates, and I didn't want to worry you." She started to quiver again.

"How bad is it?" Greg fought for words, blinking to try to drive away the haze before his eyes.

"It isn't serious at all," she

said, raising her head and looking at him for the first time. "They said that the operation will take only a few minutes. They said cancer wouldn't ever be dangerous if they always found it as quickly as this time. We—I'm really very lucky, they said."

"But you should have told me that this was your check day. I was worried about the Patagonian case, and I just—"

Then Greg stared straight at his wife, trying to pierce the strangeness that covered her eyes. He realized in a flood of terror the full implications of this day.

"Dora—do they let you have the child if you're pregnant when they find cancer? I don't remember . . . "

SHE sat erect and pushed the hair away from her eyes, suddenly the stronger of the two. "Of course, I can have the child," she said. "And please don't worry about today. I was silly, and fainted when they brought in the report, and when I came to I tried to pretend that I'd suffered amnesia. It was foolish because they could have identified me from their records, but they told me that lots of women get the same idea, so maybe I'm not so terrible after all."

Dennis wailed from the nursery and Phyllis' thin cry joined his.

"They're lonely," Dora said. "I'll go and see—"

"Wait. You didn't make a decision?"

"Of course I did." She smiled palely. "I reserved passage."

"But you can't go away! What would I do without you and the kids?"

"Don't shout so. You'll frighten them. And stop thinking about yourself. You know I'd be willing to undergo sterilization. But we can't inflict it on the kids when they're still too young to decide for themselves."

"I'll find some way out. There must be someone who'd be willing to be bought—"

"Don't talk that way," she tried to laugh. "After all, you've always said you'd like to have the children see another planet."

Greg sat down again and covered his face with his hands. "Don't say that, Dora. Sure, I'd like to take my family to Venus if they ever opened it up for colonization. But that's a fine planet. Mars is hell, and the law says I can't go with you or the kids."

"That's exactly right. The law says that we're breeding a cancer-free race of humans on Earth by sending to Mars all the people who prove to be susceptible."

Greg shook his head. "That plan wasn't set up just to breed out cancer prones. It was partly to keep

Earth from starvation when over-population became an impossible problem. It isn't really a moral issue. Look, you can probably cancel your passage, and we can arrange sterilization. The kids will approve when they grow up."

Now it was Dora who held Greg close. "I don't want to leave you," she said desperately, "but there's nothing else to do. You know the Carstairs, and the Andresens. The same thing happened to both of those girls. They talked it over with their husbands and decided on sterilization, and the Andresens broke up the next year and Mrs. Carstairs is in a mental home . . ."

Greg was silent for a moment. Then he looked at her.

"When do you leave?"

The children wailed again. "I won't be here next Wednesday," she arose and walked unsteadily toward the nursery.

REG drove the next morning through narrow streets and backed his car into a parking space close to his destination. He sat for a moment, frowning at the antiquated, dirty buildings, half-residential, half-business. Then he left the car and walked up the half-dozen uneven stone steps to Modern Laboratories.

Behind the small front office, Modern Laboratories contained an

array of testtubes, some sluggish guinea pigs, and dusty bottles. A man who Greg knew must be Dr. Haskett stood in front of the bottles and looked dubiously at him.

"My contact told me to say that I need altitude shots," Greg said. "He also told me to say that I've heard of your success in transplants."

"Sit down."

Greg found a stool, and looked unhappily at the grimy fingernails of Dr. Haskett which were now tapping the sink's edge. "Did your friend explain how much it will cost?"

"The check's written." Greg handed it over. "It's dated ahead. I can stop payment if you don't do what you promise. And secrecy is important. My wife doesn't know what I'm doing."

"Marta," Dr. Haskett called. A girl from the front office came into the laboratory, and in bored fashion pulled a soiled white robe over her street dress.

"Lie down here." Dr. Haskett shoved two tables together to provide a large, flat surface, and Marta shoved home the lock on the single door leading out of the room. "But sign this release, first. And undress. You prefer intravenous anaesthesia, I suppose?"

"There's not much risk?" Greg asked, his perspiring fingers slipping as he tried to unknot his

tie. "Not much risk that you'll fail to make good . . . a good transplantation?"

"I guarantee that part of it," Dr. Haskett said, opening a case and withdrawing instruments. "The only risk lies in the danger that it will grow too fast in six months."

"I won't give it a chance. My wife gets sent to Mars next week. I'm going to ask for a special check and get myself sent aboard the same ship with her. I know the right people."

Marta laughed openly. Dr. Haskett shot a glare in her direction, then looked calculatingly at Greg.

"You're talking like a child," he said. "If I implant cancerous tissue in your body, you can't submit to a check for at least six months. The examiners would find the scars of the operation. There are laws against what you want me to do for you."

Greg stared at the tie he had finally pulled loose. "But I can't wait six months," he said helplessly. "If Dora gets sent to Mars alone, you know what will happen as well as I do. Deported people are automatically divorced from their husbands and wives on Earth. They have to marry again as soon as possible on Mars. The women need someone to support them and their kids, the men need the women to run the houses up there

..."

The woman straightened her face with an effort, took off the white robe, and tossed it on the floor. Then she unlocked the door and returned to her office. Dr. Haskett turned his back on Greg, saying, "I'm afraid there's nothing I can do for you, sir."

Greg drove from the rundown district faster than the law allowed. Did the ordinary man on the street submit calmly when this happened to his wife or did he have contacts that Greg had never known?

Still, it seemed unlikely that many persons could escape the law. Every nation on Earth co-operated to send cancerous persons to Mars, not only to breed the disease out of Earth, but to relieve the tremendous pressure of a growing population. The effort was succeeding, even though it was taking much of Earth's resources to send the people and supplies to Mars, even though the project had delayed the opening of colonization on a real paradise planet, Venus.

Pulling into the apartment's parking cell, Greg rode the elevator to his floor.

The apartment was dark and silent. A single lamp glowed faintly on the living room desk, and then he saw the note beside the

viewphone.

"I didn't exactly lie about the date of my passage," the note said, "but I misled you. The children and I went at noon today. It's the best way. We couldn't stand the torture of a week, so I asked for immediate passage. Try to smuggle through a message to the children and me later on, but don't try to do anything more dangerous. I pray that someday the laws will change and we'll see each other again." There were a few more lines of writing, but they had been carefully scratched out. Dora's signature, barely recognizable in its shakiness, was at the bottom of the paper . . .

THE smoke in the tavern was too thick to permit easy breathing. But Greg had been choking somewhere deep inside before he had wandered into the place. He placed his glass carefully over the well in the counter, pressed the stud at the edge of the counter, and watched the mixed drink squirt up through the patent bottom of the glass. There was a slight click as the bottom tightened automatically, the price appeared on the inset beside the stud, and Greg drank. Then he put down the glass, aware that the man beside him was studying him intently.

"There comes a time," the man

said carefully, "when the fingers refuse to clench the glass with sufficient resistance. At that point, you begin to pass out." The stranger raised his glass with only slight effort, and watched Greg apply time and thought to the same procedure.

"You remind me of the way some doctors talk," Greg said.

"I never forget a patient," the stranger said, peering intently at Greg, "and you aren't one of mine, even though you're not quite sober enough to look natural. But people tell me that all doctors act somewhat alike, even when they aren't very good doctors." He drained his glass with one gulp.

"My wife was sent to Mars," Greg blurted the words out. He turned to the stranger.

"There must be some way I can bring her back!"

"Don't proposition me, fellow," the strange doctor said, blinking but keeping his eyes boring into Greg's face. "You're talking to the wrong person, if you want one of those little operations."

Greg shook his head. "I thought of that. I went to one doctor. He told me the scar wouldn't heal for six months . . . She'll be married again by that time."

The stranger pursed his lips thoughtfully for a moment. Then he looked away from Greg and began to speak lowly, as if he

were talking to himself.

"I've run across other people in your situation. Space freighters go close to Mars' surface and parachute equipment down. The passenger ships stay further away and send people down in little auxiliary ships. I've never heard of anyone smuggling himself to Mars, you understand, but if you tried to—"

"What I want is a freighter that actually will land on Mars."

"You won't find any," the doctor said. "It takes too much fuel to take off again. This way, they can carry twice as much load, by just circling the planet close to the surface." He stopped, looked at Greg quizzically. "Funny thing about cancer—you study it since you learned the bad news? No? Well, the cure is something like the disease these days. Cancer is caused by cells that are harmful to the other cells in the body and grow too fast. So we're deporting people who might be harmful to other people by propagating the disease. Then there's metastasis."

"What's that?"

"Metastasis—the migration of cancer cells. They move from one part of the body to the other."

"Like we're moving people to Mars?" Greg laughed tiredly and started to get up.

"Take it easy, bud." A hand was on Greg's shoulder, and the doctor's voice was in his ear.

"We've all got troubles. Look up this guy, if you really want to do something about the wife and kids." A hand slipped a card into Greg's pocket.

"WHAT can you do?" The recruiting officer eyed Greg suspiciously.

"Anything." Greg spoke slowly, his eyes on the officer. "A fellow gave me this card, and told me I could get work on a freighter at this address."

The man glanced at the card and shrugged. "Sign this." He shoved a dogeared form toward Greg. The table shook slightly as a spaceship blasted off. Greg signed, glancing over the form.

"This isn't a contract," he said, handing it back. "It's just a release for you in case something happens to a crew member."

"So we aren't running pleasure trips or slumming expeditions for rich guys. You were born yesterday if you don't know the freighters are a little dangerous. We don't know how much money we'll make out of a trip until we've made it. So we can't settle on any pay now."

"Get me onto the surface of the planet and you get my services free the whole trip out," Greg said. "Isn't that fair enough?"

"So you want to hop out before the return trip?" The agent's

face darkened. "Just when you've started to learn something useful aboardship?" A man standing at the door started to move slowly toward them.

"I've changed my mind." Greg got up, turned, and suddenly an arm encircled his throat. He twisted fiercely, uselessly, while the recruiting officer pulled a cloth-covered tube from the desk drawer. The word *shanghai* flashed into Greg's mind, an instant before the lead pipe smashed down against his skull.

SOMEONE was shaking Greg, trying to dislodge his consciousness from the black, cramped niche into which it was wedged. The hand at his shoulder gripped hard, shook roughly, and a voice was bellowing into Greg's ears. Greg moved a hand, experimentally. Instantly he was jerked upright.

"Time to get to work," the voice rumbled loudly. "Let's get this show on the road. My name's Moore. What's yours?"

Greg poked with stiff fingers at his eyes. Light blinded him. He was in a small room that might have been an overgrown closet. He sat on the lower half of a two-tier bunk. There was a webbing of ropes at the other side, and a couple of small lockers around the other sides. The hand that had

been shaking him belonged to a giant blond fellow who might have been in his forties.

"Feel better?" The blond giant steadied Greg in a sitting position.

"What's this all about?" Greg felt for the lump on his head.

"Well, they haven't told me about you," the fellow grinned, "but I can guess. When someone starts to ask about a berth on a freighter, they figure that he's either a potential crew member or a spy. Either way, they figure they'd better take him aboard. I got took just the same way, ten years ago. I'm not sorry now. It's a pretty good life."

"Look, I've got some money." Greg struggled to his feet. "Who can I see to get out of here?"

"Too late," Moore said. "We've blasted off. You've been out cold for two days. Don't you feel the ship?"

Greg sat down again, and suddenly he felt better. After all wasn't he on his way to Mars, where he had wanted to go all along? He could worry about smuggling himself onto the planet later, when they started to toss out the cargo . . .

Moore introduced him to his duties in the hours that followed, and later joined him in their tiny cabin.

"You'll have to take the upper bunk as soon as you feel better,"

Moore warned. "I got seniority, you know."

"Maybe I won't be around long. How do you go about skipping ship at delivery point?"

"It can be done if you've got the money," Moore said. "They run these boats to make money and they aren't particular about where the money comes from. They never are sure what sort of a price they can get for the refrigeration equipment and dehumidifiers and stuff."

"Refrigeration—dehumidifiers?" Greg stared at Moore. "Are they crazy? Mars is the last place in the world to dispose of stuff like that!"

"Mars? Who said anything about Mars, bud?" Moore looked at him curiously. "They need that stuff on Venus, because it gets hot and damp there in the summer time. We're going to Venus, my friend!"

The words stunned Greg's mind. "But my wife and kids were sent to Mars, and if I'm heading for Venus it'll be too late—"

"But you ought to have known that these birds only go to Venus—" Moore began. Greg didn't give him a chance to finish, rising abruptly and running from the cabin.

All the fear, worry and despair that he had felt since Dora's check day transmuted magically into an

alloy of anger and hatred against any authority.

He searched for the officers' quarters, his feet stamping loudly against the metal flooring, the noise thrusting new aches into his head, the aches in his head increasing his fury.

Hopelessly lost after a moment, he opened one door and caught a glimpse of inferno and the insulation-clad men who tended the propulsion units. Twice he blundered into the space between the outer and inner hulls on the wrong side of the ship. One panel in the wall that looked like a door proved to be the lid for a viewer that gave a fantastically beautiful image of the stars and planets outside the ship. He had wandered into a storeroom when a voice came from behind him:

"Getting thirsty again?"

"Where's the captain?" Greg yelled back. The man who had called to him straightened from behind a row of boxes.

"Last time I saw you, you were more interested in drinks than in the captain."

REG looked hard at muscular fingers, and the ghost image of a bar back on Earth materialized for an instant in the storeroom around the man. It was the doctor who had given him instructions on how to find the freighter

recruiting office!

"So you're the one who had me shanghaied to Venus!" Greg sprang at the man, fists flying.

The doctor ducked. Greg sprawled clumsily at the opposite wall, thrown off balance by the slighter gravity maintained in the ship. He started to rise, then dropped to his knees as knife-like pain shot through his ankle. The doctor stood over him with that strange half-smile.

"You shouldn't be angry. You wanted transportation, didn't you?" He kneeled to look at Greg's ankle and the pain conquered Greg's impulse to smash a fist into his face.

"Exactly what I wanted," Greg answered bitterly. "Of course I wanted to get shanghaied on a freight headed for Venus while my family's on Mars!"

"I think it's just a sprain, not a break," the doctor said, running a finger over the swelling ankle. "But we'd better take a picture. Come on." He hoisted Greg to a standing position with unexpected strength, and walked him out of the storeroom to his cabin. Medical equipment lined the room.

"Did it ever occur to you that someday you're going to get the lawbooks thrown at you?" Greg asked, quietly but with hatred. "They stopped tolerating this sort of thing centuries ago."

The doctor laughed. "Fine talk from a man who tried to smuggle himself on Mars."

"You don't have any proof. I don't even know your name."

"It's Coleridge. You can put doctor in front of it, too. I really did study and get a diploma. Then I decided I could have more fun out in space than in some stuffy office back on Earth. Maybe you'd enjoy this sort of life, too, if you haven't congealed completely." He sat Greg before a small X-ray machine.

"I've always wanted to spend the rest of my life fighting dinosaurs on Venus while my family is on Mars and my career is on Earth." Greg said acidly.

"You know very well there aren't any dinosaurs on Venus," Coleridge replied mildly. "It's practically perfect as a planet, with a few gadgets to keep things dry and cool." He looked straight at Greg. "You know it's the most desirable planet in the system but they've discouraged emigration because they need the spaceships to handle the cancer colonies on Mars. It's only tramp freighters like this that can get away with trips to Venus." He pulled the film from its fixing bath and squinted at it. "Not a sign of a fracture."

REG began to wonder what Coleridge was leading up to.

Everything he said appeared to be a case of diverting attention from Greg's problem by talking about Venus' merits. He decided to play along until he found out.

"You think I could find something to keep myself occupied on Venus?"

"Sure, they need smart men, and you can tell the employment agencies that your wife and kids are on the way."

Greg stared at him, feeling the torment return.

Coleridge grinned. "Haven't you ever put two and two together about the population figures?"

"You mean there's a chance for my family to get from Mars to Venus?"

"Look. You remember that they started to send people from Earth to Mars a century ago, because the population had overgrown Earth. Emigration has gone on all that time, millions of people have been sent to Mars, and once they get there they have children and raise families just as they would do on Earth. Now, if you weren't a lawyer, always splitting hairs and quibbling, you'd have guessed long ago what other intelligent people sooner or later realize. Mars is smaller than Earth, only part of it is warm enough for Earthmen—so Mars got overpopulated, too, a few years back."

"Remember what I told you in

the bar about metastasis? I thought you'd catch on then, when I tried to draw an analogy about migrating cancer cells and migrating people.

"They've been afraid to tell people on Earth the real situation, because Venus has been held up for so long as the second Eden where we'll all live as soon as the cancer problem is licked. But actually, they've had to ship new arrivals on Mars off to Venus in recent years, because there's no more room on Mars. I suppose they'll break the news to Earth some of these days, formally. If you were closer to the grapevine, you probably would have heard the rumor long ago."

Greg sat there gaping at Coleridge. Finally he asked, in humbled tones: "If Venus is such a paradise, how come you don't drop off there and stay there yourself?"

"Well," the doctor said, beginning to put away his equipment, "I've been thinking of it, but I

wanted to save up some money first, and this seemed to be about the best way to do it. It's a little more humane than the way some doctors do, implanting cancer conditions into people who have to undergo operations to get themselves deported. Of course, it's a little more uncertain.

"For instance," he said, eyeing Greg sharply, "now that you have that bum ankle, I could probably tell the captain that you'll be no good as a crew member, and I could have you dumped overboard when we begin to circle Venus. That way you wouldn't have done a thing illegal and you'd have a clean slate to meet your family a few days later."

Greg rubbed the lump on his head, gingerly flexed his sore ankle, remembered the emotions of the past three or four days, and then reached for his check book.

"I think I'm beginning to understand," Greg smiled. "Got a pen?"

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH:—

SLAVES TO THE METAL HORDE

by MILTON LESSER

Johnny Hope stumbled through the wreckage of what had once been great Earth cities — now the dumping ground of robot monsters. Don't miss this thrilling novel of Man fighting for survival!

JUNE ISSUE OF IMAGINATION ON SALE APRIL 27th

Earth's espionage ring was a headache, so the Martian Security Chief offered ten thousand credits for a key agent. But even for a price—

SPIES DIE HARD!

By Arnold Marmor

"THIS man is a spy for Earth," a voice droned, as the telecaster vibrated and a photo of Harry Horn flashed on the screen. "Ten thousand credits for this man, dead or alive. Contact Lazar of the Security Police. Harry Horn. Thirty-four, five feet, eleven inches, one hundred and seventy-two pounds."

Lynn Brickel snapped off the humming machine. She frowned. Horn had been high in the Martian Security Police, one of Lazar's top men. Now Horn turned out to be a spy for Earth. Why hadn't she been told? Was Green losing his trust in her? Hadn't she helped McLean and Sanderson escape from Mars?

Her short tunic shimmered as she began to pace the floor. She stopped short as a hum splashed through the room. She went quickly to the door and pressed a red button on the wall.

But the vibration of the elevator

did not reach her ears. Puzzled, she opened the door, stepped into the marble hall. She shrugged, started to return to her apartment when the sound of footsteps on the stairs halted her. She waited.

He came into view. Harry Horn. There was no mistaking his face. It had flashed on and off the telecaster throughout the day.

"Brickel?" he said, coming up to her.

His white coveralls were spotted with grime. There was a dark bruise on his right cheek.

"Yes," she said.

"I'm Harry Horn."

"I know."

"You've got to help me." His voice was urgent, pleading. He brushed past her, into her room. She walked in after him, shut and locked the door, leaned her back against it.

"You can't stay here," she said.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm alone."

He went through the apartment, returned to the front room. "I had to make sure." He sank into the low divan, covered his face with his hands.

She walked toward him. "You can't stay here," she repeated.

He looked up at her, his eyes frightened. "Do you have any idea of what Lazar will do to me once he gets his fat hands around my throat? He won't kill me right away."

"Why come to me?"

"You can help me."

"What can I do?"

"You can help me get away. A turbo-engine space ship. That's all I need. It's small and fast."

"But why come to me? You haven't explained."

"You helped McLean and Sanderson."

"How do you know this?"

"We're both in the same organization but not in the same unit. The leader of my unit instructed me to go to you."

"I see. Who is your leader?"

"I can't tell you. You know that. I wouldn't ask you your leader's name."

LYNN shrugged slim shoulders. "It wouldn't make any difference. He is not stationed on Mars."

Horn jumped to his feet. "You

will help me?"

"If I can."

"Can you get me the ship?"

"I suppose. But we'll have to wait for night. It is dangerous to do anything now. Ten thousand credits. Lazar wants you awful bad. He offered five for both McLean and Sanderson."

"I was very close to Lazar in the Security Police. I know too much."

"We all make mistakes."

"I envy your logic. But I can't see it that way. I was considered too good an agent to make a mistake."

"It's too late to cry over it now. When it is dark I'll contact—a friend—and have the space ship ready."

Horn grinned. "You're still not sure of me?"

"It isn't that. But you don't belong to my unit. We can't name names to outsiders."

"You're right, of course. You've been well trained."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

She set food in front of him and watched him eat.

"What is Lazar like?" she asked. "I have heard of him."

"Cruel," he said. "A sadist. Death is the easy way out when you're in Lazar's hands."

"It will soon be dark," she said.

He stood up, his hunger satisfied. "Tell me," he said, "was it difficult getting Sanderson and McLean out of Mars?"

"No," she said. "Not difficult at all."

"Good." He went to the interphone. He dialed, spoke, "You may come up now."

"What are you doing?" her face paled.

He turned to her, smiling. "Lazar was wondering how Sanderson and McLean escaped. You were on the master list of suspects. I was waiting for you to confess."

Lynn stiffened. "It—it was a trick."

"That's right Brickel. Too bad. You're too pretty to die."

"That—that was a message to Lazar."

"Yes. He'll be here shortly."

Lynn slipped her hand in the pocket of her tunic, brought out a small blaster.

"Don't be a fool," Horn said. "Maybe you'll be spared. Why take your life? Just tell all you know?"

Lynn smiled. "I wasn't thinking of taking my life. But yours."

Horn frowned. "Don't be an idiot." He advanced toward her. Lynn shook her head slowly. "Now it's my turn to be clever." Horn's face went wild. "You can't escape Lazar! Listen to me—" She blasted him.

LYNN opened the door.

Lazar stood there, fat and ugly. There were two men of the Security Police with him.

"Come in," she invited.

They came in. She shut the door. Lazar looked down at the dead Harry Horn.

"You said dead or alive," Lynn reminded Lazar. "You owe me ten thousand credits."

"What happened?" Lazar snapped at her. His flesh-bedded eyes studied her.

"He came to me for help. I had to bide my time. I told him I'd help him. I was waiting for the chance to get to you. He was by the interphone a few minutes ago. It was the chance I needed. I pulled my blaster, covered him. He made a dash for freedom so I had to kill him."

"This is crazy," one of the men said. "Horn must have had her confession. But now what do we do for evidence?"

"Shut up!" Lazar snapped.

"Your word is good, isn't it, Lazar?" Lynn said.

"What do you mean?"

"The ten thousand credits. As a loyal citizen I've earned them."

"You'll get your credits," Lazar snarled, frustration in his eyes.

"I know I will," Lynn said, smiling.

* Accurate Radar *

EVEN the strongest disbeliever sometimes thinks twice when he recalls that the things were spotted on radar. He's willing to concede that the human eye can be bamboozled by an optical illusion—that's what he thinks the Saucers were—but what about radar? Can you fool it?

The answer is yes! The tricks and vagaries of radar are just beginning to be understood. Radar itself is all right—it's simply that the atmosphere through which its waves must pass, has a tendency to

play tricks on those waves.

For example, where a layer of cold air bounds a layer of hot air, an "inversion barrier" is set up, which means that radar waves do not pass through this invisible boundary entirely. A portion of them are reflected. The effect is complicated and depends on many factors. Dr. Menzel, the physicist tells of the effect of such a boundary on a naval radar unit. It fired at a radar target for a long time until it was discovered that it was bombarding the image of an island a hundred miles away!



"Get down there and capture the darn thing before it runs away!"



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month *IMAGINATION* will review several titles — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

TALES FROM GAVAGAN'S BAR

by L. Sprague DeCamp and Fletcher Pratt. 228 pages, \$3.00. Twayne Publishers, New York, N. Y.

Anything can happen in Gavagan's Bar. These delightfully whimsical and droll stories of the DeCamp-Pratt duo will excite many a chuckle. This nicely made-up book offers twenty-three incidents which have happened to the incredibly varied clientele of New York's most elusive bar. Note the "elusive"—not "exclusive." For anyone at all comes into Gavagan's!

There was the sad story of the party giver who confused "gin" with "djinn." There was the poetess who prayed for a baby—she wasn't married. There was . . . to go on is impossible.

Good fantasy, entertaining, well-written, amusing, is a rare commodity. But not, apparently, with DeCamp and Pratt. If occasionally their little whimsies pall, the remedy is simple; instead of trying to do the book through, sample it occasionally.

It is possible to suspect the division of labor in this book. I'd guess that Pratt was the idea man and DeCamp the writer. There are so many elegant little flourishes that could be only DeCamp's. On the other hand, there are as many clever situations—that's Pratt.

Fantasy has always seemed a poor second to science-fiction as entertainment. But a few more stories like this . . . well.

THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES—1953

Edited by Everett F. Bleiler and T. E. Dikty. 279 pages. *Frederick Fell, Inc., New York.*

Anthologies of s-f pour from the presses and often it is difficult to see the point of their existence. Not so with the Bleiler-Dikty efforts. There is hardly a poor story in this volume—and some are extraordinarily good. Arthur Porges "The Fly" is an example of a virtuoso's skill in terror and horror though there is not a line of fantasy in the story. Richard Matheson has a powerful story "Lover, When You're Near Me", providing an excellent standard for judging.

But unquestionably, the finest thing in the anthology is the cri-

tique of modern science-fiction called "The Trematode" by Alfred Bester. It is an analytical treatment of the relationship between science-fiction and literature, done with discernment, wit and taste.

With a critical eye but an optimistic soul, Bester mercilessly dissects science-fiction—and its readers!—coming up with novel and startling conclusions.

There are many good stories in this anthology, but even they pale before the *tour de force* that is Bester's essay. It's not hard to understand why Bleiler and Dikty chose this stimulating and provocative introduction. You won't want to miss it!

THE WHITE WIDOWS

by Sam Merwin, Jr. 224 pages, \$2.95. *Doubleday and Co., Inc., New York, N. Y.*

It's unfortunate that one must begin with "it's a good story, but . . .", yet that is Sam Merwin's latest offering. Normally an excellent writer, Merwin proves that here. The trouble is, he has no story to tell. For a hundred and fifty-odd pages, you wade through the trials of a biologist's novel approach to haemophilia — smoothly written of course—finally to come to grips with the Amazon horde, planning to set the world on fire in order to set up the inevitable matriarchy. This weak theme is the backbone of the story. And it's not enough.

On the other hand, to be fair, it

must be said that the characterization is first rate, the reactions of human beings are real, and the writing is first rate.

In a phrase, poor story, good writing. Usually in science-fiction it's the other way around and in Merwin's case this judgment isn't necessary—usually.

You might go out of your way to read this book if you had absolutely nothing better to do or if you're a Merwin aficionado. Fortunately you can expect better things from Merwin and I'm sure the next book will be better, more like his classic "House of Many Worlds." It proves you can't start with a straight novel, smile lightly and throw in an s-f pitch!



Conducted by Mari Wolf

So far I admit I haven't been personally enthusiastic at all about science fiction movies. Usually the original writer has been so buried under Hollywood cliches that the flavor of the story is gone. Also there's the probably perfectly valid point that the mass audience wouldn't understand a straight, undiluted science fiction story, one that wasn't carefully explained to them somewhere.

You have the non-science of a *Rocketship X-M*, or you have the technically wonderful *Destination Moon* (my favorite still, I think) with, however, stock characters and the Woodpecker thrown in for exposition. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was much better presented, and on the whole quite believably characterized (although the reasons for the attempted villainy of the earth girl's boy friend

sounded contrived and pulpy). However, I still wish they would make a few more like *War of the Worlds*.

I should also like to see a Heinlein or a Kuttner story filmed straight, not written down to the mass audience. This may very well happen. There is, I suppose, one good thing to be said for the children's hour type of space opera you'll find on TV. It at least acquaints the audience with some of the rudiments of science fiction, however garbled. The transition from bad stf movies to good ones shouldn't be too hard for the viewer—no harder than the transition from bad stf comics to good stories.

Some writers would be much easier to film straight than others. Almost anything of Bradbury's, for example, could be translated almost unchanged to the screen, as long

as Bradbury's mood was kept, since you don't need a technological background to appreciate these stories. Stories that lean heavily to the science in science fiction would be considerably harder to adapt, I'm sure. There would be the danger of making them too documentary, on the one hand, and too cluttered up with the rudiments of science fiction, tacked on human interest of the boy meets girl variety, on the other.

Lots of stf pictures are being made, and others are being discussed. Probably none of them will ever please all the science fiction fans—nothing has pleased them all yet, thank heavens.

* * *

Now to the fanzines.

DESTINY: 25c; quarterly; Earl Kemp, 3508 N. Sheffield Ave., Chicago 13, Ill. Earl Kemp and Malcolm Willits, the Portland, Oregon co-editor of *Destiny*, turn out one of the best looking "little" magazines you're likely to see on any subject, science fictional or not.

Robert Johnson's cover on the Number 9 issue, representing "The Meaning of Destiny," is a fine layout, a symbolism in black and white. Malcolm Willits and versatile writer-artist Julian May have some exceptionally well done interior illustrations in the same issue.

A feature for several issues of *Destiny* has been the answers to the topical question, "Why Conquer Space?" This issue you can read the answers given by Wernher von Braun and Jules Simmons. Is anyone collecting the answers as a series? They would make a fine short anthology someday, and possibly one with true historical interest.

Edward Wood writes on "Eliminate the Double Standard." The standard isn't that between the sexes but that between the professional and amateur branches of science fiction. Very good.

The fiction also is excellent. I'm sure you'll enjoy Roberta Collins' "The Rebel," a story of a man in a modern matriarchy. There's Nancy Kemp's "Sundown," very well written also. *Destiny* is a magazine I'm sure you'll be happy to read and proud to show off to your friends—and it's a magazine that I feel it's an honor to appear in.

* * *

VEGA: 15c; bimonthly; Joel Nydahl, 119 S. Front St., Marquette, Mich. The current issue of *Vega* is its Annish, or anniversary issue. It's something huge and special, as annishes usually are, and if you're not a regular subscriber this one costs 50c.

It's like any issue of *Vega*, only several times more so in quantity. Stressed are articles about various phases of fandom, fan activity, and science fiction in general. Nothing stuffy here though. Seventh fandom may take its activities seriously, but it presents them most entertainingly.

Fiction in *Vega* is reduced in quantity over its early issues. I think you'll like the one fan story of Fred Chappell's "All Else is Perfect." Bob Tucker reports on "State of the Union: 1953." Dean Grennell and Harlan Ellison's columns are fine always.

But perhaps the piece de resistance is Walt Willis' historical article, "Fandom at Sixes and Sevens." You've really missed something if

you've never encountered the work of Willis.

"Redd Boggs writes "Annishes Are a Plague," citing the mortality among fanzines that expire in the blaze of glory of their special issues. Well, that won't happen to *Vega* . . .

* * *

SCIENCE FICTION ADVERTISER: 20c; quarterly; 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. If you're a collector of science fiction you have doubtless already run across the *Advertiser* and can appreciate it. If you're considering taking up collecting, I suggest you start by reading through what you'll find here. But even if you're not a collector at all, just someone who is interested in stf, don't pass the *Advertiser* by.

Almost every issue carries an evaluation of either an author's work, or a theme, or some other aspect of science fiction. The articles—often they're really essays—are well thought out and thought provoking. Even if you don't agree with the writers you'll be stimulated by mentally conjuring up arguments against them.

In the issue I have here Reginald Bretnor writes "On Taking Science Fiction Seriously." In it he deplores the attitude, often encountered, that stf isn't to be so taken.

Bretnor discusses the speculative content of good stf, and the danger that the speculation may be watered down, leaving only the entertainment value. He goes well outside the stf field to discuss the modern trend of not thinking for oneself. He sees science fiction as

one of the few entertainment mediums where the reader must use his own thinking processes, not merely remain passive.

* * *

PSYCHOTIC: 10c; monthly; Richard Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Portland 12, Oregon. Here's one that I hope stays monthly. It's so refreshingly itself. Somewhere in the issue I have here Geis says that so far as he knows *Psychotic* and *Vega* are the only monthlies yet (there are others, but not too many). Well, *Vega* is bimonthly now, as I discovered from the Annish. Once a month seems to roll around fast enough when you're only writing one column; I shudder at the prospect of publishing an entire fanzine that often.

Psychotic, in case you've seen it before, is still just as much so as ever. In fact, if you haven't sent in your dime for it yet you're missing something. Physically, the zine is dittoed; it's just about the best ditto job you'll see. The covers, front and back, are line drawings by Geis. (Caricaturing on issue No. 5.) "The Leather Couch, Where the Editor Rambles on, and on, and on," is always a choice part of the zine, as are Geis' opinions of other fan mags in his review section.

Harlan Ellison's column, "Thoughts from Outer Space," covers the pro field. And there's V. L. McCain's "It Started with Gold." Horace, that is. Anyway, there's a lot here, and you should see it yourself.

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; published twice a month; James V. Tau-

rasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. Things can change so fast in the professional science fiction world that unless you live in one of the publishing centers or subscribe to a zine like *Fantasy-Times* you may be months out of date on current news.

Here in F-T, for example, you will find out who is publishing what, which editors have been hired or have resigned, what is coming up in the science fictional way from Hollywood or the book publishing companies.

It may not come out daily, but this fanzine will certainly keep you up to date on all the news, stf wise.

* * *

SKYHOOK; 15c; Redd Boggs, 2215 Benjamin St. N. E., Minneapolis 18, Minn. With all the talk going on in some of the newer fanzines about sixth fandom and seventh fandom, a few of the really old timers still publish on (and some of the newtimers could take a few lessons here, too). Boggs' *Skyhook*, in its sixth year of publication now, has a definite style of its own. It has long since left behind it any crudities of its formative stage, and is just about as good an example of a timeless fanzine as you'll find.

In the new issue Sam Moskowitz writes on "Fan and the Universe," defining that sometimes elusive creature, the science fiction fan. He defines a fan as anyone who regularly reads science fiction, an active fan as one whose interests in stf extend beyond mere reading. He goes on to mention some of the stf fans, and writers, of historical times and quite a list he presents.

William Atheling jr., in his "The Issue at Hand," presents a very well written account of the religious theme in science fiction, its trends and how it may be presented in the future. Very good, as is the rest of the issue.

* * *

MUZZY: 15c; monthly; Claude R. Hall, 807 N. Main, Carlsbad, New Mexico. Editor Hall also lists his army address, but as army addresses are likely to change, you can probably reach him more easily at the above.

Muzzy is a mimeoed fanzine, informal, containing quite a bit of humor. You'll learn about fannish personalities here.

In addition to fanzine reviews and a large and interesting letter section, *Muzzy* runs quite a few reverse-twist stories. In the issue at hand I especially liked James B. Davis' "The Wise Way," or what might happen to a man who has spent all his life hoping he'll be the one to welcome the aliens in peace.

Another good story is Bob Stewart's "Foul Ball," or what might happen to you if you went traveling through time in order to change the outcome of a baseball game.

If you like the less formal type of fanzine, one that tries to acquaint you, perhaps controversially, with personalities of the stf field, you'll probably enjoy this one. It's most entertaining.

* * *

KAYMAR TRADER: 10c; monthly; K. Martin Carlson, 1028 Third Ave. So., Moorhead, Minn. Here's the fanzine for the died-in-the-printer's-ink collector. Whatever

you're looking for in the stf line, back issue books or magazines, even obscure items, you can probably obtain them through a want ad here. Unless you happen to see them already listed for sale . . .

Ad rates are reasonable here, so if you're in the buying or selling market you can easily afford this medium.

In the issue I have here Joseph Miller writes on what current magazines might be worth ten years from now. His conclusions: hang on to the magazines and you'll get about double your money back someday!

* * *

STARLIGHT: bimonthly: Don Howard Donnell, 5425 Santa Monica Blvd., Apt. 205, Los Angeles 29, Calif. The first two issues of this brand new fanzine are being distributed free. After that, it will be 5c a copy, as things are planned now. You will get a very good looking photo-offset zine for your nickel.

Starlight plans to try to pay for itself by the advertising it carries. Ad rates are, the editors claim, about the same as those in the leading advertising zine. They seem high for a brand new market though. I don't know whether the zine will get along financially or not. But it's a very attractive give-away item, and certainly well worth anyone's nickel.

The first issue contains a short story, "Osan, My Beloved," by Atlantis Hallam, and Bob Tucker's brief autobiography. Why not sample this one? It's a fine looking zine.

* * *

PEON: 10c; bimonthly; Charles Lee Riddle, 108 Dunham St., Norwich, Conn. This issue is minus a couple of its regular columns—seems that editor Riddle was recently the victim of a thief who made off with his briefcase, which contained, among other things, copy for *Peon*.

Still, he's got plenty of good material in the issue. Carol McKinney's "S F Covers in Ten Easy Lessons" sorts out and classifies the various scenes you're likely to see in the stf section of your newsstand. Quite entertaining.

* * *

DAWN: 10c; bimonthly; Russel K. Watkins, 110 Brady St., Savannah, Georgia. How come Dawn is the Kentucky fanzine from Georgia? It never does say . . .

This is a dittoed fanzine with a varied subject matter. Editor Watkins' tale, "The Paid Fan," is one of those stories written around stf personalities, but this one manages to be quite amusing. Ron Ellik explains and defends "Seventh Fandom," which previous issues of *Dawn* had dealt somewhat harshly with.

The article over which I'm still shaking my head, though, is Professor George Adamsky's "Astronomical, Pro and Con?" It's apparently by flying saucer authority Adamsky, and it's fascinating reading, as witness some of the conclusions.

We are told that stars contain "the gasses of light," whereas planets do not; that there are billions of planets (probable, but who has counted them?); that we can't be sure life exists on these planets be-

cause we've never photographed cities on them . . . Also, everything is surrounded by air, since if there were no pressure on the outside of an object, internal pressure would crack it. It may be a different kind of air, though.

Read it for yourself.

* * *

LOOKING BACKWARD: 2c; Peter Graham, Box 149, Fairfax, Calif. This one is mimeoed on sheets of paper the size of a postcard. It comes to you with a genuine postcard for a front cover. (With additional stamp, naturally.) In fact, if you would rather send a self addressed postcard, or a two cent stamp, you'll get this fanzine right back with it.

It's newsy and lots of fun, with jokes, bits of verse and fannish doings thrown in. Completely informal. It's a good buy too, for a low, low price.

* * *

SCINTILLA: 10c; Larry Anderson, 2716 Smoky Lane, Billings, Montana. This fanzine, now lithoed, contains articles, stories and some rather good fan art. In the issue I have here Jo Anne Slade writes a short-short, "Roll Out the Barrel." It carries the going-over-Niagara-Falls idea to Mars, and it's quite a suspense story up to its reverse-punch ending.

Also, Forrie Ackerman and Ron Ellik are represented in the fan fiction department. Larry Balint reviews fanzines and Terry Carr gives out some news.

This one shows promise in its new and improved format.

* * *

NITE CRY: 10c; bimonthly; Larry

Walker, 5921 E. 4th Place, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Editors Walker and Don Chappell hereby introduce another newcomer to fanzine ranks. It's a mimeoed job, quite promising, with a diversity of fiction and articles.

This issue contains two convention reports. Earl Kemp's "Bye Bye, Bellevue" is, of course, a tale of the Philadelphia World Science Fiction Convention, whereas Don Chappell's "Oklacon Report" covers the more regional Oklahoma get-together.

For a new fanzine this one is quite legible and well-planned, and probably will show considerable improvement with succeeding issues. Best of luck to it.

* * *

GEM TONES: G. M. Carr, 8325 31st St. N. W., Seattle 7, Washington. *Gem Tones* is part of the mailing of the Spectator Amateur Press Society, or SAPS. There's no price quoted for non-SAPS members, or non-traders of fanzines, but you could probably get a sample.

Each issue is named for a gem. Sometime you'll run out, G. M. . . . But while the names hold up, fanzine readers can get the news and reviews and often caustic comments of one of the most decisive fans of all.

* * *

* That's all there are room for this time. More fanzines next issue. Remember, if you have a fanzine you would like reviewed send it to me, Mari Wolf, *Fandora's Box*, IMAGINATION, Box 230, Evans-ton Illinois. See you next month . . .

—Mari Wolf

Letters from the Readers

AUSTRIAN VIEWS ON STF

Dear Ed:

Maybe it will interest you to get a letter now and then from a reader who is not an American.

Madge is one of the very few (three at the utmost) publications that ever made me feel like writing to the editor. I really like your magazine.

Perhaps it will surprise you to hear that there is no comparable periodical in German language, or if there is I have not been able to find one. Science fiction, we call it *Zukunftsromane*, is published here only in form of books, and the level usually is a very low one.

But the reason why I decided to write you was not to tell you what I liked but what I do not like. Now down to business.

Many, perhaps most of your authors, seem to agree that a future, higher civilization will, quite naturally, have no time or interest to play around with such trifles as

personal freedom, human rights, constitutional rights, and so on. Men are sent to other stars or even galaxies or into wars and are not even permitted to ask what it is all about. There is always some "high council" or a similar gang and these boys decide—of course always wisely and in the interest of the world—what mankind is going to do. To the plebs it is left to admire and obey them.

This attitude is not very encouraging if one considers that the USA is about the biggest hope we have left against these "future states" we have already got. Remember, we here were in this advanced state of development and civilization—at least politically—not too long ago, and some other nations, like the English, have had it on their heads for several years. So we have a general idea of what these dreams of your authors are like in reality.

That is, of course, not a fault of you who publish Madge, and I

am not trying to change it. It is only something that struck me as incongruous and I wanted to draw your attention to it.

Now your art. It seems to me that Americans are not grown up enough to be shown a human body. (I do not know what that has to do with growing up, but that seems to be the general attitude.) We here (in some parts of) Europe tend to wag our heads and tails when we see that people of all times, lands and stars find it self-evident and natural to conform to the rules of the Hays-Office. As if Hollywood films were not bad enough. I have seen Salome fix her veils to a bathing suit, David fall in love with Bathsheba through a wooden screen, and girls from the Orient or the Pacific islands do their seductive dances in two-piece bathing suits. But please don't foster that vogue in science fiction. I am afraid, in your country an artist must feel like a scientist in the middle ages; either conform or see the world through bars. The cover of the February issue is such a sad example, though in this case it did fit the story somehow.

Last sad point. I know Americans may admire the Germans, but must all space ships look like their V-2 "revenge weapons"? What shall a pointed nose penetrate in empty space? And what are "outside" fins and rudders good for? By the way, why this nonsense about escape velocity on page 123 of the February issue? Since Jules Verne nobody seems able to get rid of it. Don't you realize that you could walk off the Earth if you had a road and enough time?

This immortal escape velocity would only be necessary if you wanted to give a space ship all the drive at the very beginning—that is, if you wanted to shoot it out of a gun. Otherwise the necessary speed is just a question of available time contra "*g*", i.e., the acceleration human beings can stand.

Now please don't take what I said about Americans and their art seriously. It is just what I might feel if I were an American and had just got fed up with something. Afterall, you are still the only country able to produce *good* science fiction in any quantity worth mentioning. And you will probably have space ships before we have an airline!

So forgive any seemingly rude words, and also what I did to the English language! Just carry on bringing good science fiction and I will be one of the people to whom the stars look a little nearer the night after Madge arrives.

Ernest Wolf
Wels,
Vogelweidestrasse 16
Austria

The history of mankind can perhaps be summed up as: The Leaders and The Led. In a totalitarian state "the led" obey but do not necessarily admire. In a democracy "the led" neither have to obey or admire. Majority rules, and only then do all obey the dictate of the masses—expressed through The Leaders. If the so-called 'future states' of which you speak crop up in American science fiction it is only because we here get a kick out of posing such a problem within a story and having our hero who represents

the democracy we are proud of take on and defeat the tyrants. After all a good story must contain some element of conflict — good versus bad—and dictatorship is our idea of evil. So don't be misled that we are harbingers of a future doom; we only exemplify in fiction what we have accomplished thus far in fact.

The question as to what lengths art may go before it be censored is one depending upon the mores of a given society. In the USA nudity for commercial entertainment is considered crude rather than artistic. There are pros and cons on this subject, naturally, but for good taste we generally agree in this country that clothing (scant though it may sometimes be) should serve both a functional and moral purpose. Realism is a matter of viewpoint.

Design of space craft will of course depend upon method of propulsion; the standardized "cigar" shaped ship is logically functional for atmosphere flight — streamlined to cut down air resistance, and rudder-fins for easier navigation. Naturally such design is ridiculous for outer space travel where any shape will be satisfactory. But let's not misinterpret our artists' conception of a space ship with any admiration for the Nazi "revenge weapon". After all, space ships were being so depicted in American magazines long before there was a Nazi regime. As to disregarding escape velocity, we don't see how it can be tossed aside until technology proves otherwise through actual experience. It seems quite likely that the first inter-space venture will be made by

a ship with terrific initial thrust. Your idea about "walking" off the face of the Earth is intriguing. Man, that's one highway that would do a terrific tourist business!

Many thanks for your letter, and rest assured that American science fiction will continue to supply the world with the best entertainment along those lines — until we get the real thing and can experience it in person. And that will be only the beginning for science fiction. Write us again, soon . . . wlh

A DELIGHTFUL AFTERNOON

Dear Mr. Hamling:

This is just a note to tell you how very much I enjoyed BLESSED EVENT by Charles F. Myers in the February issue of IMAGINATION. This is really some feat. My husband has always been a science-fiction fan, but try as I may, I believe this is the first time I've ever finished a story of this type. After reading the first paragraph I just couldn't put it down. I absolutely howled . . .

So thank you for a delightful afternoon!

Kay Lurie

923 N. Edinburgh
Los Angeles 46, Cal.

And thank you, Kay, for a delightful letter. You'll be seeing more of Charlie Myers in coming issues.

. . . wlh

NON-EMPIRICAL JUDGMENT...

Dear William:

A New Year's resolution I have made, namely, to get a missive of mine published in IMAGINATION.

But what to write about—ah, that is the question. I could say something like this; "I really flip my lid over Madge, the coolest of the cool," but you already are deluged with letters of this type. Or I could rate the stories in the last issue, but that's old stuff, too. And so, working my brain to its fullest capacity, I've decided to discuss a favorite topic of mine: *The non-empirical judgment that the general non-stf reading public uses in evaluating science fiction.*

One of the major criticisms of stf is that it's too fantastic, contains ridiculous ideas, impossible inventions, and that rocket-to-the-moon stuff couldn't possibly happen—only crackpots would read or write such foolish trash.

Are the ideas and inventions expressed in science fiction fantastic? Most of them may be in our present society, but the non-stf critic fails to realize that it is impossible to name *one* invention or scientific concept of today that wasn't described or mentioned in a stf magazine years before our present society was exposed to the reality.

But then our critics retaliate by stating that anybody can make a lucky prediction of the future. True, because from our presentday science any intelligent man may predict with reasonable accuracy what the future holds in store for us. Man cannot conceive of an *entirely new idea* or invention. But from the scientific discoveries and theories of today, one may use his imagination to foresee the future development of scientific progress. But here is where our critics have left

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themselves wide open.

The critics say that man can predict future scientific progress, but they said before that stf is utterly fantastic. Now if man has prophetic powers, then science fiction is not fantastic, because it's written by men—many of whom work in various scientific fields. Consequently our critics are guilty of using non-empirical judgment and logic. (The making of a statement, believing it to be true, but lacking sufficient scientific proof to back it up.)

Now let's suppose that the so-called realistic critics hold nevertheless, to their stubborn idea that stf is still screwball literature. Alrighty . . . then our critics are un-

consciously saying that man can't predict his own future. It is established fact, through the ages, that men predicted scientific development and progress. Thus, the critics remain guilty of non-empirical logic and find themselves locked in a closet with the key on the outside.

So if any fans become involved in a debate over the prophetic vision of science fiction with a group of non-stf persons, throw this argument into their faces and watch them hang from the ceiling and drip green.

Ray Schaffer, Jr.
122 N. Wise St.

North Canton, Ohio

The many scientific developments of the past decade—and before—were written about as "old stuff" in stf magazines for many years. To us that is proof enough, Ray. The scoffers of whom you speak, are just not hep, Ray. A few doses of science fiction would cure them of their fog-bound outlook. They would no longer call stf crazy — but CRAZY! Real crazy, man! . . . wlh

A ZORCH ISSUE, BY GOSH!

Dear Ed:

I've just finished reading the February issue of Madge, and the only way to describe it would be to say it's ZORCH! I have not been reading stf too long, but I can say that I like *Madge* better than any other science fiction magazine.

The best story in the ish was THE MAN WHO MADE THE WORLD. I thought the idea was unique and well presented. The next best story was Dwight V.

Swain's PLANET OF DREAD. You were right in teeing off on that guy Wegars in the letter section for condemning space opera. Any real fan would prefer to read a Swain action story than to wade through pages of wire diagrams and electric circuits!

You're getting to have the best covers in the business. I really thought the cover on the February ish was swell. I like those "Mac" girls! . . .

Robert R. Stewart
2123 West St.
Berkeley 2, Cal.

The "Mac" girl will return soon, Bob, so watch for the July issue cover. It's really a wow—pardon us, zorch! . . . ••••• wlh

A BU-BU YET!

Dear WLH:

What? Oh, no! As any stf-fan knows, the cover on the February ish is utterly impossible. What are you trying to do, ruin the standards of stf? *The female had more clothes than the male!* You better let dear Mr. McCauley in on the facts of life. Tell him he made a BU-BU . . .

PLANET OF DREAD was the best story in the ish, even if its cover was absurd! I couldn't stop until I had finished the yarn. At first I was all set to tear into you and scream, SPACE OPERA! But on second thought, it was used so well that I decided to leave your neck intact.

Yeditorial: Good plea, boy, but why waste it on us? I'm sure that anyone who reads science fiction must believe that space travel is

coming sooner or later. So instead, why not send copies of MADGE to the President, V-P, Cabinet, all the Congressmen, top Army, Navy, and Air Force men, and the boys working on guided missiles . . . Instruct them to read the editorial and then do something about it. See how simple it would be to get them started on space flight?

And maybe they might read the rest of Madge, and then you'll have all those new readers. With the profits you can pay some of the bills for making the first space ship. Your name will go down in history as the inaugurator of space flight and will be uttered joyously by all the BEMs sitting on other planets waiting to be discovered!

Bob Kvanbeck
1218 21st Ave., N.
Minneapolis 11, Minn.

How could McCauley have made such a mistake? We'll have to caution him about that in the future—gals with clothes—horrors! Tut, tut, Bob, our editorial was not wasted—it drew a letter out of you! Why don't you write to the aforementioned people and tell them not to miss Madge! We're much too modest wlh

A FRANTIC COVER!

Dear Bill:

I just can't explain myself in mere words. Words aren't enough to describe the cover on the February issue.

McCauley outdid himself!

I think I'll have a photograph taken of it, have it blown up real big and hang it on my bedroom wall.

Enough for the cover, now the interior. The Editorial, excellent as usual. Referring to your last line. I'll trot out the ladder—but who'll climb it—and who'll steady the bottom?

PLANET OF DREAD was a very exciting novel. Once I got started I couldn't tear my eyes away. (Except for dinner, and then I gulped down my food!)

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR was interesting, and the cartoons terrific.

To sum up, the best for February was the cover—real FRANTIC!

John G. Fletcher
347 Oak Rd.
Glenside, Pa.

Crazy — Zorch — Frantic — Madge is getting to be some mag, real gone, huh? wlh

BOO TO YOU TOO!

Dear wlh: (what crazy names editors have!)

I am thoroughly convinced that all editors are fiends. I'll tell you a little story . . . It became imperative that I rearrange some of my mags. After a half hour of sorting I managed to clear out a dresser drawer. With a smile on my face I gayly staggered out of the spare room with a few hundred mags on my shoulder (and whoever said stf is light reading should be shot!) and began to fill the drawer. It was then that I discovered that two copies of Madge placed end-to-end are one-eighth of an inch longer than the depth of a drawer.

A true fan never gives up. Placing one foot in the drawer, I pulled on the little knobs, trying to pull

the drawer far enough apart to stick two rows of mags in. No luck. So I put the foot back in the drawer, braced the other foot firmly against the bed, and with an arm in front of me and one behind I strained my sliding muscles. Success! The mags went in. With a sigh of relief I sat down on the bed and CRASH. My firmly braced foot had been braced firmly on an iron bar which was now broken in two places. I blame you, Ed, for having to sleep on the floor last night!

I see you got a terrific cover on the February issue of Madge. It would, however, have been better if the gal didn't have that heavy belt on! And if anyone wonders what type of mind I have, let me say that I take my lesson from the street cleaner who was fired because he couldn't keep his mind in the gutter.

Since this is a new year I'll list a few things I dislike about stf mags and such.

I do not like Dwight Swain in any form or order. He is trite, tasteless, and obviously designed for kiddies whose parents decided they are too old for comic books. And I wish you would stop comparing him to Burroughs. I want to read him some day but you're scaring me away.

I do not like fan snobbishness. And I'm not in love with the usual definitions of reader and fan. To me a reader is one who likes stf but not enough to pay for it. There must be millions of these Library Legioneers. I maintain that anyone who buys a stf mag more than once is a fan. Not one of the active

fan, but still a fan.

I do not like your remark of a year ago concerning reprints. There is a definite need for reprint mags. We aren't all old-timers with complete files from 19—? up.

Above all, I don't like editors who send their mags to any of the newsstands in a city and then smirk in the back pages, asking: "Having trouble finding us at the newsstands? Subscribe and stop worrying!" A mag like that I wouldn't subscribe to if they gold-plated the covers.

In conclusion, I must aim a blast at Madge's letter section. I don't mind egoboo. But poo! You have nothing but sticky, icky goo! I think it's a matter of exclamation points. They can say, "Madge is great." Period. A simple opinion. Or say, "Madge is great!!!!" We know this is a screwball letter and can chuckle over it. But when they say, "Madge is the greatest! I like it! You got a good mag!" Gaaaaaa.

To all readers: If you are interested in stf and want to get in on some fun, don't sit on your hands and wait for us to come to you. Fandom doesn't know you're alive. So write a letter to somebody. Anybody whose letter interests you. That is what I did, and everyone I've written to turned out to be a great guy with a wonderful sense of humor. Wishful thinking won't get you anywhere. Right now! Grab your pencil, typewriter, or crayon (if they won't give you anything sharp) and start writing. If nobody else, write to me!

As for you, ed, a BOO to you!

John Courtois

318 East Commercial St.
Appleton, Wisc.

*Methinks a night on the floor put
you in an ill humor, Johnny. But
rest easy, son, we think you're a
real gone character! The only
question is, how far gone? Hah!*

. wlh

WHO COULD ASK FOR MORE!

Dear Mr Hamling:

Since there must be a first time for everything, this is it for me and a letter to the editor.

I just finished reading the February issue of Madge. It was terrific! The biggest understatement of the year . . . I have been reading Madge (as well as *Galaxy* and others) for some time, but the Febr-

ary ish topped everything. Not one story was the least bit crummy. PLANET OF DREAD was about the best story I've ever read in a science fiction mag. (And that's a lot!) It combined just enough science and sex appeal to satisfy any reader. And action! You couldn't ask for anything more. And in the same issue ROCKET TO FREEDOM was also tops. Not to mention BLESSED EVENT.

My congrats to Madge on being the best stf book on the market, bar none. You have gained one more really solid reader, for life!

Mike Endres—W4ZAE

200 Edward St.

Tallahassee, Fla.

*We hope you live for centuries,
Mike! wlh*

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